Medical Grail

Revised Edition

Raymond C. Andrews, M.D.

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Revised Edition

A Novel

Books by Raymond C. Andrews, M.D.

The Life and Times of Benjamin Wiggins, MD
How to Be a Patient and Live to Tell the Tale!
Driving the Great Western Trail in Arizona
Arizona's East-West Trail: A Backcountry Challenge

DVD by Raymond C. Andrews, M.D.

The Great Western Trail in Arizona

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Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference,

- Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken 1920*

For Helen

Holy Grail

(in modern spirituality) a symbol of the spiritual wholeness that leads a person to union with the divine.

TheFreeDictionary by Farlex

Medical Grail

(in modern materialism) a symbol of material wealth that leads a medical professional to union with the devil.

Raymond Clifford Andrews, M.D.

Chapter 1

Robert's shaking fingers grappled for the receiver of a phone he heard but could not see. It was dark and musty in that strange room. His clawed hand groped blindly for the rotary telephone. It scrabbled around, knocking an empty whiskey glass to the floor, before it found the jangling instrument. Only half awake, he put the receiver to his ear. He felt slightly dizzy.

"Pronto!" he slurred a word used by Italians to answer telephone calls. "Cris? Pronto!" He was speaking again to his dead wife.

"Dr. Bascom? Dr. Robert Bascom?" a female voice stuttered, confused by his reply.

"Yesh. Sorry," the thirty-five-year-old physician said, realizing his error. "Yesh, dammit," he mumbled. His wife had died months earlier, yet he still talked to her. When he did so among friends, they gently reminded him that she was in a better place. It angered him. Bascom did not consider lying in a coffin in a cold tomb in Italy "a better place."

He sat up, ran a shaky hand through his hair, and squinted at his old army watch. It was between 0400 and 0600 hours. The dimly iridescent hands shimmered too much for him to be certain, but it made no difference. The phone call had interrupted a pleasant dream, and that annoyed him.

He snorted dust from his nostrils. "Who is this?" he

asked.

"Donna Franklin. I'm a nurse at the hospital and I've a critical patient you need to see."

"Miss Franklin," he said, rubbing an eye with the heel of his hand, "I start work tomorrow morning, or this morning, whatever today is. I don't have staff privileges yet."

"Dr. Perkins says you can treat patients," she insisted. "There's no time to argue about this now. You can discuss it with Mr. Cohen in the morning, sir, but I need you here immediately."

"What've you got?" he yawned.

"An unresponsive twenty-five-year-old Mexican who's cut his arm to the bone," she answered. "His blood pressure is fifty over zero, pulse thirty-two, and respirations four. I put in a Foley catheter, but he's got no urinary output."

"How much blood have you given him?" Bascom swung his legs over the side of the bed, cupped a hand in front of his nose and exhaled into it. The sour smell of stale alcohol bounced back at him, and he quickly turned his face from it. *If shock doesn't kill the guy, my breath sure will.*

He switched on the light on the nightstand. He had vowed to stop drinking the day he started work in Whitney, but he had not been able to resist pocketing the miniature bottles of Scotch the hostess had offered him on the flight from Italy. He should have disconnected his phone before draining them and falling asleep. Now he reeked of half-digested Scotch and he had to see a patient. Even if he was not drunk, being a tiny bit under the influence violated his rigid standards of proper physician behavior. Robert Bascom knew he would chastise himself over this lapse for weeks, or until some other convenient, guilt-producing breach of protocol replaced it.

"No blood, just saline," the nurse replied.

"Don't you treat blood loss by replacing it?"

"Yes, but I need a doctor's order."

"Aren't there any on duty in your emergency department?" Bascom's eyebrows furrowed with genuine concern.

"Dr. Perkins is here, but he's busy."

"Order six units of whole blood and three units of Hetastarch. I'm on my way."

He hung up the phone and stood, holding onto the nightstand until the wooziness passed. He rubbed his fingers over the stubble on his cheeks and thought about shaving, but there was no time. He donned the sweaty dress shirt he had worn on the plane, and fumbled with its buttons while cursing those nightcaps.

Bascom smoothed the shirtfront over his flabby abdomen and stepped unsteadily into his jeans, sucking in his stomach so he could button them. When he relaxed those muscles, a doughnut of flab oozed over his belt line. *Disgusting.* In the six months since his wife's death, he had morphed from a trim marathon runner into a human pear. He had agreed to modernize Whitney's hospital in an attempt to return to the Dr. Bascom his colleagues respected and sometimes feared. Unfortunately, he would make his debut appearance disguised as a street bum.

He pulled on his wool jacket and finger-combed his unkempt blond hair before exiting the house. It was November in the Arizona desert, and compared to the freezing temperatures in the Italian mountain town he had left the day before, the morning air felt spring-like.

Bascom paused on the empty street to get his bearings. The taxicab driver, on the way in from the Phoenix airport, had told him the hospital was three blocks down and two over. But in which direction? He shrugged and started off in the direction he was facing.

He tried to freshen his breath with a mint spray he al-

ways carried with him, but the can was empty. He licked its nozzle, hoping a leftover drop of the sickly sweet liquid would mask the stale Scotch. If anyone got too close, he would breathe into his sleeve or hold his breath and step back from him. It had become part of his daily routine.

You know her death wasn't your fault, Bascom told himself. He tossed the canister into a trash bin as he hurried along the uneven sidewalk.

"You think it wasn't, but it was! You'll never live it down, Dr. Pain in the Ass Perfect." "Basta!" He smacked the side of his head with his fist to silence the cackling voice.

He pulled up the collar of his jacket and turned onto Apache Lane. An Emergency Department sign flickered in the distance, and he ran toward it, slowing to catch his breath before bursting through its doors. When Cristina was alive, he could have run the distance without working up a sweat. Now he gasped for air and held his chest like an old man having a heart attack.

A homely young woman, in a white dress and blue sweater, quickly rose from her chair as he approached the nursing station. He was wheezing.

"Are you in pain?" she asked, mistaking him for a patient. A well-dressed man seated next to her glanced up from his newspaper, frowned, and then resumed his reading.

"No, out of shape. I'm Dr. Bascom," he rasped. "Nurse Franklin called me in to see a patient."

"Oh, sure. He's over there," the woman said, pointing to the room behind him. He wheeled around and saw two patients lying on stretchers on opposite sides of the otherwise empty ward. One snored peacefully while a nurse and a young man in a blood-spattered uniform attended to the other. Even from where he stood, Bascom could see the pa-

tient was an unconscious, cadaverous young Mexican. He walked to the trio and read the vital signs flickering on the old, battered monitor next to the stretcher: heart rate twenty, blood pressure forty over thirty.

"Hi," Bascom said. He touched the Mexican's cheek with the back of his shaky hand. It was cold. Death was near. He clicked his tongue as he touched the dry, white gauze dressing over the man's arm.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the nurse staring at his shaking hand, and he quickly stuck it in his pocket. The woman, wearing a pale green scrub suit which did not hide her shapely curves, was dark-haired, brown-eyed, and in her early thirties. An American Sophia Loren – only much prettier.

She slid her granny glasses down to the edge of her nose, shook her head, and then pushed them back up and read the label on the bag of blood.

She knows, Bascom realized. A new shiver of old shame crept over him.

"I'm glad you're here, doctor," she said as she compared the bag's label to the patient's wristband. "I'm Donna and this is Roberto, a paramedic from AZ-Amb," she explained, nodding to the emergency medical technician who rhythmically compressed a rubber Ambu bag attached to a tube in the patient's mouth.

"I'm sorry I woke you, but this man desperately needs your help."

"Those vitals are incompatible with life," Bascom said, shaking his head and pointing to the monitor. "It'll be impossible to save him. Has the Hetastarch arrived?"

"It's on the way."

"It treats shock by increasing plasma volume."

"I know what it does, doctor. You mumbled your order over the phone," she replied with a hint of a reprimand as

she attached the bag to a pole at the head of the stretcher. “I wasn’t sure if Hetastarch was what you wanted, but it sounded close enough, so I ordered it.”

Haughty and contentious came to his mind. She irritated him, but he knew an unshaven, flabby, half dressed doctor, smelling of stale alcohol did not inspire confidence in the staff.

"Refresh the vitals, please," he said. *Mumbled?* he sighed. *She did say, "mumbled," but she knew damn well I slurred my words.*

Donna hit a button on the monitor and the blood-pressure cuff hissed softly as it slowly ballooned around the patient's arm. "Pulse twenty, pressure forty over thirty," she said. "I've never seen vitals so low before."

"He's agonal. On the verge of death,” Bascom explained. A pharmacist arrived with the Hetastarch, and Donna hung a bag of it on the pole next to the blood bag.

"How did this happen, Roberto?" Bascom asked as he watched the nurse plug the tube from the Hetastarch into a needle in the man's arm. He cupped his hand discreetly over his mouth and breathed into it. The drop of breath freshener was not working, and he took a step back from the EMT.

"His ex-wife called nine-one-one as he broke into her apartment. He cut his arm on the broken glass in the door," Roberto said. He squeezed the bag and the patient's chest slowly rose as he forced air into his lungs.

"We found him a block away, lying in a pool of blood under a truck."

"How long was he there?"

"An hour or more," he replied. “We don’t know for sure.”

"He's past the 'Golden Hour,' the maximum a body can survive in a state of shock before irreversible tissue death

sets in. And that dressing is bone-dry," Bascom said irately, pointing to the white gauze on the Mexican's arm. "The guy's out of blood."

"It was bloody when I changed it," the nurse protested weakly.

"I'm sure," he said with a tinge of sarcasm. "What were his vitals when he arrived?"

"Pressure eighty over fifty, pulse a hundred-forty," Roberto replied.

"Why didn't you transfuse him then, Miss Franklin?" Bascom asked. "You could have easily saved this man's life. This looks bad."

"I wanted to, but Dr. Perkins was busy," Donna said apologetically.

"Too busy to order for blood for a man who is dying right here in the ED?" Bascom fumed. "I don't believe this." He turned toward Dr. Perkins who, sensing his new colleague's anger, snapped his newspaper tight and hid his face behind it.

"Did you ask him specifically to order blood for this patient, Miss Franklin?" He dug his right hand deeper into his pocket and impatiently drummed the fingers of his left on the stretcher's railing.

"I asked him three times, actually I begged him the last two times," she said. "Each time he refused and said to call you."

"Busy doing *what*?" he insisted.

"What he's doing right now. Nothing," she replied. "Dr. Perkins won't treat Mexicans or Indians."

Bascom had worked with bungling physicians and corrupt physicians, but this was the first time he had ever worked with a killer physician. If the nurse told the truth, Perkins was another Mengele, the infamous Nazi physician who performed deadly experiments on prisoners in concen-

tration camps during World War II. Maybe Perkins didn't take pleasure in torturing his patients the way Mengele, “the Angel of Death,” did, but he had let a man bleed to death simply because he wasn’t white.

"I'll deal with him later," Bascom said through clenched teeth.

The nurse angled her head to his voice, like a puppy trying to understand a new command. "Someone should've dealt with him a long time ago," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" Bascom said as he watched a pale cherry soda blotch, far from the dense red color of blood, appear on the bandage.

"I said, ‘the IVs are running fine, doctor."

"Um, sure. Do you have an arterial repair kit?"

"In the OR."

"Get it."

After the nurse left, Bascom undid the bandage and beamed the overhead light into the jagged gash above the man's elbow. Deep in the wound a mixture of dilute blood and Hetastarch oozed from a severed artery. He crumpled a corner of the bandage, gently pressed it over the torn vessel, and held it in place until Donna returned and placed a blue bundle on the steel stand next to the stretcher.

"Put a finger on this," Bascom ordered before opening the surgical pack. He slipped on a pair of sterile latex gloves as the nurse read the vital signs flashing on the monitor.

"His blood pressure is now forty over zero, doctor," she said. "He's in shock."

"You mean he's *still* in shock," Bascom corrected. He picked up a clamp, held it over the wound and nodded. Donna removed the gauze and he reached in to clamp the torn artery, but it was no longer bleeding.

"Measure his pressure again," he sighed, tossing the

clamp onto the tray. It skidded noisily across the metal before landing silently on the blue towel. The nurse hit a button on the monitor and the blood pressure cuff inflated as Bascom took a penlight from the EMT's shirt pocket. He flashed its light into the young Mexican's eyes, but his pupils did not contract in response to it.

"Zero," she said. "No pressure and no heartbeat." She looked over at Bascom. "Should we start CPR?"

"It's too late for that," he said, replacing the penlight in the EMT's pocket. "He's dead, but he didn't need to be," Bascom rued as the monitor blared a warning that the patient's heart had stopped beating.

"Turn that thing off. I'm pronouncing him dead at seven-thirty," he added, looking at his watch.

"Is his family here?"

"No," Donna replied, shaking her head. "He's alone."

"Too bad you couldn't save this guy. You did what you could," Bascom said, "under the circumstances."

He returned to the nursing station and took the chart the clerk held out to him.

"Would you have the social worker give his family the bad news?" he asked her.

"Sure," she agreed with a smile.

"Thanks. Where's Dr. Perkins?"

"He left a few minutes ago."

"Please tell Mr. Cohen I'll be in his office at three o'clock."

"I will."

Bascom documented the events on the dead man's chart and left the hospital. The thought of a bed, even a lumpy, dusty one, quickened his pace, and minutes later he entered his tan Santa Fe rental house. He glanced at its open-beamed ceilings, wound his way between the hand-hewn chairs and the river rock fireplace, and slouched

down the narrow hall to the bedroom.

A queen-sized bed with a carved headboard and matching nightstands shared a cramped space with a rugged pine armoire that boasted a full-length mirror. He paused in front of it to stare at his disheveled self. *Cristina would kill me if she saw me like this,* he thought. He also knew that if she were alive, he would not be where he was, looking so scruffy.

He crouched down, opened his large suitcase on the floor, removed her picture, and traced her flowing blond hair with his finger. Cristina smiled seductively back at him from her antique silver frame. "I miss you, Cris," he whispered. "I did what I could. But it wasn't enough. Forgive me."

He choked out the last word, and, setting his dead wife's photograph askew on the nightstand, collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2

The sun was well into the western sky when Bascom awoke on his first day in Whitney. The scene in the emergency room had dominated his dreams. No matter how fast he ran to the hospital, and no matter how much blood he poured into his young Mexican patient, the result remained the same: accidental death. Or was it murder?

When he crawled out of bed, he felt weak and exhausted, as if he had run a marathon with his legs chained together. He opened the windows in the musty, dust covered house, and then went to the bathroom to shave. He smeared a blue gel over his cheeks and chin and put a razor to his face. His hand, once steady enough to pick a metal speck off an eye with a pin, shook, and he nicked his chin. As he stuck a piece of toilet paper on the bleeding cut, he thought of Perkins, the doctor who had refused to treat a patient because of his race. He had never faced a similar situation during his ten years as an emergency department director on the east coast, and he knew he could not ignore it.

He also knew his choices were few and flawed. He could call the police and the state medical society and accuse Perkins of…what? Murder? He shook his head and continued shaving. That never happened, even in the movies. Doctors never ratted on other doctors. It violated a code of silence that was far more powerful, but less deadly,

than the Mafia's *omertà*. It meant certain economic death. Plus, he would have to rely on Nurse Franklin's testimony for support. If she denied that Perkins had refused to order blood, and instead said that a disheveled, half-drunk doctor had misunderstood her, Perkins would sue him for slander. And he would win, since no jury would ever believe a doctor in America would let a man die just because of his skin color.

He could book the next flight to Italy and let someone else deal with Perkins. There he could continue sipping wine in his *baita*, his comfy log home in the forest above Lizzano in Belvedere, until he saw double and could no longer stand. He had been doing that since Cris died six months earlier, but he had accepted the job in Whitney to break that habit.

Bascom wiped the last of the shaving cream from his face and scratched off the paper bandage with a fingernail. He knew he could not ignore what he had witnessed in the ED a few hours earlier, but he also knew he could do nothing about it. He now rued his decision to accept George Cohen's request to solve a few "small problems," as the hospital administrator had referred to them, in his run-down hospital in the middle of Arizona’s Sonoran desert.

Perkins the murderer was not a "small problem."

He wasn’t completely certain yet, but he began to think he would meet Cohen, apologize for any inconvenience he might have caused him, and then return to Italy on the next plane.

He showered, dressed in his signature sport shirt and jeans, donned his wool jacket, and checked his appearance in the mirror. When Cristina was alive, his jacket hung smartly from his tall, muscular frame. Now the wrinkled garment draped over his shoulders and expanding belly like a half empty potato sack. *Pathetic!*

That same morning Dr. Benjamin Wiggins pulled two jackets out of his bedroom closet. One was a cotton Windowpane check design in a light pink. The other was tan linen, suitably wrinkled, as if it had been slept in. Which it had. Food stains spotted each of them, although yellow mustard with tiny seed husks dominated the cotton garment. After spinning them back and forth on their hangars, as if he were examining works of art, he had tossed the cotton jacket on the bed and returned its mate to the closet.

"I don't want to scare off this guy too quickly," he had murmured, "but it won't much matter what I do. Cohen will threaten him about his contractual agreements, and Thompson and Grimes will block any attempt he might make at real change. He won't last a week."

He had known other doctors that had answered the administrator's bogus plea to save Whitney's populace from the bad, expensive care it received in their local healthcare facility, but none had ever succeeded. Cohen never really wanted to change the way he did business, he only wanted the financial support the new recruits' patients would bring to his failing facility. He had to resort to chicanery to attract them to the dying town in the middle of the searing desert, since every physician for miles around knew of the hospital's atrocious reputation and gave it wide berth.

Those whom Cohen had conned into accepting his offer, and who were too naive to read between the lines of their contract, learned about the severe penalties of violating its terms from his lawyers.

After his selection, Ben had slipped into his stained jacket, donned a pair of eyeglasses with a strip of tape running diagonally across one lens, and left for the hospital.

On the way, he puzzled over what he would call Robert Bascom, the Italian doctor Cohen had hired to

straighten out the hospital.

How about Baggins? Wiggins thought, scratching his head. *Or Dr. Bumpkin? I'll be gentle. I'll just call him Bishop, like the chess piece. That's all it is here anyway, a big game.*

The hot November sun baked his back as Bascom walked to the hospital. In the moonlight, the building was an innocent shadow awash in a sea of twinkling stars, but in the harsh, merciless Arizona sun, it was a squat, dingy box with cracks snaking across its weathered green stucco.

Bascom wiped the sweat trickling down his aquiline nose onto his blond mustache and mumbled, "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate – abandon all hope ye who enter here." It was a line from Dante's *Divina Commedia* that came to mind each time he entered a hospital. Any hospital.

As he walked the cracked walkway that meandered between dying mesquite trees and south-pointing compass cacti, an old man stepped out of the hospital's glass entry and waved a white handkerchief in his direction, as if surrendering to an enemy behind him.

"In here!" he yelled with a cracking voice. Bascom nodded and quickened his pace.

"Hi, Dr. Bishop," Ben said as they entered the building together. "I'm Dr. Benjamin Wiggins. Pretty hot for this time of the year, eh?" He extended his arthritic hand and tilted his head so he could see around the taped lens of his glasses.

"My wool jacket makes it even hotter," he agreed, gently shaking the man's knobby hand. "My name is Bascom, not Bishop, and I'm pleased to meet you."

"Baggins. That's what I said. Say, where's your eye-talian accent?"

"I live in Italy, but I was born and raised in America,"

he explained.

"Me too!" Wiggins giggled. "Where's your wife?"

"She died on the ides of March."

"Like Julius Caesar. I'm so sorry." He patted Bascom's shoulder consolingly. "I'm sure you miss her. Well, let's get on with it," he said as they entered a well-lit foyer. Chairs in different styles, shapes, and physical condition lined its threadbare carpet, and a nauseating scent of oil of wintergreen wafted through the air.

"The vacant wards are down there," Wiggins indicated with a shaky finger.

"Vacant?" Bascom echoed curiously.

"Yep. Only the unlucky or the uninformed come here," he explained as a blond, casually dressed man exited a nearby office.

"Well, if it isn't Georgina Cohen!" Wiggins said irreverently as the man approached. He was of medium height, in his fifties, had a flattened boxer's nose, and was twenty pounds overweight.

"Thanks for the nice introduction, Dr. Wiggins," the man muttered sarcastically before turning to Bascom. He offered a hand whose knuckles had been broken and mended years ago. "I'm George Cohen, the hospital administrator."

Bascom shook his rock-hard hand. "My pleasure," he said with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you after all our phone calls, doctor. Let's go to my office," he said before he turned back down the hall.

"Bye, Dr. Blasely, and beware," Wiggins warned. "White man speak with forked tongue."

"He turned eighty last month and is nuts," Cohen explained, rotating a finger alongside his temple as they entered his small office. "We tolerate him because he doesn't

make mistakes. We'll force him into retirement when he makes his first."

The administrator sat behind his scratched metal desk, and Bascom plopped heavily on the worn couch in the rear of the room and rested his head on its greasy back.

"Why does he call you 'Georgina'?" he asked through a stifled yawn.

"We had a disagreement some years ago," he replied vaguely. "Donna told me about the incident in the ED. I fired Dr. Perkins and I am sending a complaint to the medical board."

"I hear this wasn't the first patient he's murdered."

Cohen frowned and pinched his lower lip. "We've had complaints about him in the past, but nothing this bad. He's the medical society's problem now."

"Why didn't you fire him sooner?"

"Because he's a moneymaker. He orders tons of tests and is good for business."

"Hippocrates would lop off your head for that heretical statement," Bascom scowled.

Cohen frowned again before a nervous smile crossed his lips. "I'm sure he would. Things here have become too much even for me to stomach. Graft is OK, after all, this is a hospital, but I do balk at 'murder,' as you crudely put it.

"Dr. Berkford, your buddy I met at a conference in San Diego, told me if you couldn't straighten out this place, no one could."

"I pay Lance fifty cents a compliment," Bascom laughed.

"Don't let me down, Doc. I need you," Cohen pleaded. "I'm sure Dr. Berkford didn't exaggerate your worth. How's your house?"

"Musty and really dusty, but its open-beamed ceilings remind me of my cabin in Italy. It'll do."

"It is a nice place from the last century. Been abandoned since Emma Mullins died. I'll send over our cleaning crew as a welcoming present."

"Once a week?"

"Once, period."

"Better than nothing, but thanks," Bascom agreed.

"Now to business," Cohen said, slowly rubbing his hands together like a salesman who has just spotted a clueless buyer. "According to our contract we'll pay the salaries of your office help for six months, your rent for a year, and guarantee you a minimal monthly income for a year. You'll repay all we give you, plus interest and legal expenses if necessary, if you don't stay one full year."

"Do I have to work in the ED, or oversee your clinics?"

"No. We have emergency room docs under contract. Nurse practitioners staff our clinics. We expect you to admit all your patients here, and to use our laboratory and X-ray facilities for any outpatient testing."

"That's fair," Bascom agreed.

"Good. Our hospital has forty-five beds and is shaped like a square doughnut," he said. He drew a quadrangle in the air and then poked its imaginary center with his finger.

"You told me on the phone that your daily census was five," Bascom interrupted.

"Sometimes fewer."

"How do you run this place with so few patients?"

"State and local tax revenues, our ED income, plus what we can collect from the patients our doctors admit," the administrator explained. "That will improve now that you're here. In fact we're hiring two more nurses to help with the increased patient load."

Bascom was puzzled. "Where are these new patients coming from?"

"From you!" Cohen replied, energetically jabbing his

finger at Bascom. "If you admit two or three a day and keep them here four days, we'll fill up this hospital in no time."

"Wait a minute," Bascom said, bolting upright on the couch. "You want me to straighten out this place, but you also want me to hospitalize people who don't need it just so you can improve your bottom line?"

"Why, yes. I thought you understood our tacit agreement," Cohen protested.

"It must have been really ‘tacit,’ because I clearly didn't." He sucked on his upper teeth, producing a soft clicking sound. "I only hospitalize patients I can't treat in their homes or in my office. And they're about as rare as a mosca bianca, a white fly."

"I just told you, doctor, that if you don't uphold our agreement," Cohen scolded, "you'll have to repay us whatever we give you with interest. It's your funeral." A sinister smile crept over his lips as he leaned back in his chair.

"What you're asking is unethical, and I won't do it,” Bascom said as he stood from the couch. “I came to tell you I was leaving, and I’m pretty sure I still am, but this place has stirred my curiosity. I'll need to think about staying,"

"Fair enough. I'll expect your answer within a week," Cohen replied, standing from his chair.

The men shook hands uneasily and Bascom left the office.

Ben was reading a memorandum tacked to the bulletin board in the hallway when the new physician exited the administrator's office. He waved and Bascom walked up to him.

"Everything OK with Miss Cohen?" he asked with a grin.

"You know the answer already, Dr. Wiggins. Maybe I'll see you again," he replied before turning towards the

exit.

Ben shrugged and limped down the hallway to see Evelyn, the hospital's head nurse. The slim, elderly, gray haired woman wearing a tailored suit was touching the spines of each volume on a shelf in the bookcase behind her desk when he entered her office. "Where are you?" she asked the books.

Ben came up behind her, gave her a bear hug, and whispered, "I love you" into her ear.

"Not here, Ben," she protested meekly. "What if someone were to see you?"

"He'd see how a man who is in love acts when he meets his woman."

"If he doesn't get her fired," she laughed, untangling his arms from around her waist.

"That pimp Cohen won't try that again. Anyway, he's here," Ben said. He kissed her hair and then sat in a flimsy wire chair in front of her desk.

"Who's here?" she asked, pulling a book off the shelf. She placed it on her desk and sat down.

"The doctor from Italy. Poor bastard. He's got the most soulful eyes I've ever seen. I'll bet it's because of his wife's recent death."

"That's too bad." Evelyn frowned. "Did they have children?"

"Dunno. But Thompson said the guy was so drunk when he spoke to him on the phone, he could hardly understand him. He didn't smell like he'd been drinking today. I was going to give him two weeks before he turned tail and ran, but since he's sober, I'll give him three."

"He might surprise you, Ben," she warned as she open the book and ran a manicured nail down its index.

"Why?"

"Donna told me she had to call him in last night be-

cause Perkins pulled his, 'I don't treat Mexicans' routine.' Unfortunately, the patient died. He was only twenty-five. She said when Bascom told her he would take care of Perkins, he had a look in his eyes that made a chill run down her spine."

"That's not the impression I got, but if you're right and he stays, I'll take you to dinner at our town's most popular restaurant."

"It's gone out of business," she laughed. "Haven't you noticed there are no more strays around?"

"Ev, there are times when you're more cynical than I," he replied.

"Rarely, Ben. Now get out of here. I've work to do."

Outside the hospital, Bascom doffed his wool jacket, swung it over his shoulder, and walked a block under the blazing sun to the office Cohen had agreed to pay rent on for a year. It appeared to be, from the outside at least, in worse repair than the hospital, and he hoped it did not smell of oil of wintergreen. "Robert Bascom, M.D., Family Practice," was inscribed in Gothic text on a shiny brass plaque screwed onto the wall by its entrance. Numerous holes above and below it suggested many others had preceded it.

He pushed open the door and entered a large, dimly lit room. Wooden chairs with worn straw seats leaned on a low table covered with dog-eared magazines, or stood haphazardly against walls that had irregular shaped patches of paint peeling off them.

He entered a hallway to the left of the receptionist's window, leaned over the Dutch door barring entry to the small office, and knocked on its jamb. An elderly woman cleaning typewriter keys with a Q-Tip and alcohol looked up from her task.

"Hi," he said cheerily.

"Oh, good afternoon. I didn't hear you come in. Are you Dr. Bascom?" the elderly woman asked, brushing her curly gray hair from her still pretty face. He nodded. "I'm Helen Sylva," she said, her light blue eyes sparkling behind rimless glasses. "Mr. Cohen asked me to be your secretary, when I'm not hanging out in bars."

He laughed. "Do you hide that cross hanging around your neck before you go in for a drink?"

"Neither. Poor joke. I really don't drink, and I *never* go into bars."

"You're forgiven. Do we have any patients today?"

"No, but Mr. Watts will be in tomorrow. Mr. Cohen wants you to call him right away. It sounded urgent."

"I just came from the hospital," Bascom said before continuing down the hallway. He glanced into two patient cubicles, each equipped with a wooden desk, two chairs, and an examining table. Open cabinets hung over a wide counter with a sink in the middle of the nursing station, and a bookcase, a metal cabinet, a copy machine, two wooden chairs and a desk with a cracked leather top competed for space in his cramped office.

He returned to his secretary.

"What time will Mr. Watts arrive?" he asked the woman still cleaning her typewriter.

"Ten o'clock," she replied without looking up. "Will you buy us a computer? This belongs in a museum."

"I'm a semi-Luddite, so I'll need to think about it. Cohen is going to send someone to clean up this place."

"Yes, I know. Later today," Helen agreed. "We get one free cleaning and then it's up to us."

"I'll see you in the morning, Mrs. Sylva," he said before leaving the office.

Chapter 3

That night Bascom tossed and turned on his lumpy mattress as he struggled with his options of staying in the desert or returning to Italy. Cohen had fired Perkins, making his decision easier, but he would not fill his hospital with healthy patients, tacit agreement or not.

Yet something, or someone, intrigued him about Whitney, and just before dawn he decided to stay in town a few weeks longer. He knew he might regret his decision, but, for the moment, a battle was better than a bottle.

At ten o'clock that morning, wheezing, forty-year-old Jonathan Watts, his blue bib overalls pooled around his swollen ankles, sat on the examination table in Bascom's office.

"I've got these painful bumps, Doc," the haggard farmer rasped, pointing to the red circles on his shins. "I'm out of breath and my fever won't go 'way. Been sick two weeks now."

Bascom glanced at the irregularly shaped lesions. "That’s erythema nodosum," he explained, pointing to an especially large one just below the patient’s knee.

"That sounds real serious," the man exclaimed, wide-eyed. "Am I gonna die? I sure feel like it."

"It's unlikely, but it’ll be a year before you'll feel good again. You've got Valley Fever, a fungal disease named after the San Joaquin Valley in California where it is espe-

cially common. You need to get a test at the hospital so I can verify my diagnosis and monitor the course of your illness."

"Never!" the farmer retorted fiercely. He coughed spasmodically, and held his head in his beefy hands for a minute before continuing.

"I feel crappy, but I won't go there," he replied, looking up. "My wife went to that dump for belly pain and they kept her three days until her appendix bursted and she died.

"Helen promised me you'd take care of me here, but if you can't, I'm going to find a doc in Phoenix."

"That's sixty miles away. There's no need to travel that far when we can do the test here," Bascom explained.

"Won't happen. Will you help me here or not?" the farmer wheezed, slowly pulling up his overalls.

"Of course, but I'll still need the test."

"I'll get it in Phoenix," he said firmly.

"As you wish." Bascom nodded, took a pad from the desk in the corner of the room, and jotted down the name of the test he needed. He tore off the sheet and handed it to the farmer who stuffed it into his pocket and went on his way.

Bascom went to Helen's office.

"Thanks for warning me," he said sarcastically.

"I'm sorry," she explained, choking on her bagel. "I thought it'd be better if you heard firsthand what you'll be up against in this town. This office is like a motel. Doctors check in, stay a week or two, and then are gone. Cohen has ordered so many signs, he gets a discount from the trophy shop. You'll be hearing more complaints like Jonathan's, and some are a lot worse."

"I can't wait," he said with a shrug before returning to his office.

Bascom's reputation for keeping patients out of Whit-

ney's hospital, to Cohen’s chagrin, grew quickly among the gritty farmers and their impoverished migrant workers. Within weeks he was seeing twenty patients a day and had to hire Frances Durio, a divorcée, to assist him. On her first day, the perky young red-head warned him that the patient he was about to see had warned her she would not go to the hospital.

"She's the third patient today who'd like to torch the place," Bascom sighed. "What are they afraid of?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she said with a knowing grin. "You'll never get anyone to go there, but if you do and something bad happens to him, he'll judge you like he judges your colleagues in this town."

"Which is?" he asked as he turned the knob to the door to the examining room.

"My father would wash out my mouth with soap if I told you," she said, flinging up her hands.

"I already know then. My last patient told me." He laughed and entered the room. Mrs. Gonzales, a gaunt, gray-haired woman in her sixties, was curled up on the narrow examining table and groaning softly. A young woman gently caressing her forehead explained that her mother had been in pain for a month and had lost fifteen pounds.

Bascom gently placed his hand on the woman's stomach. Her scream troubled him less than what he already knew would be her response to his request.

"Mrs. Gonzales, you need to go to the hospital."

"Not in Whitney," she whimpered, shaking her head.

"You need treatment I can't offer you in my office. You really do need to be in a hospital," he insisted gently.

"No. They hate us Mexicans there. A few weeks ago they let my nephew bleed to death after he cut his arm," she said defiantly. "I won't go."

"Mama," her daughter pleaded, clasping her thin hand in hers, "I think you can trust Dr. Bascom to make sure they take care of you right."

"If Dr. Grimes was here, he'd send me to Phoenix," she replied.

"He saved my life when I was barely in my teens, Dr. Bascom," the daughter explained, wringing her callused hands. Waxy, scarred lesions, the result of years in the fields picking vegetables under the brutal Arizona sun, covered her arms.

"I bled from my vagina every couple of months," the woman said, "and Dr. Grimes told me I was getting cancer. He took out my uterus to save my life. He even gave us a discount for paying cash since we had no insurance. He's such a nice man, but he's away and my mom's pain got too bad for her to wait for him to return."

"My stomach hurts real terrible," Mrs. Gonzales moaned. "If I go, you promise you won't let them hurt me?"

"You have my word," Bascom agreed, resting his hand on hers.

"Okay," she said reluctantly.

"Good. Dress and go to the hospital. I'll meet you there later," he said before going to his secretary's office. She looked up from her desk when she heard his four note rap on her door.

"Helen," he said, "tell the hospital we're sending over Mrs. Gonzales, and have someone call me as soon as she's admitted."

"OK," she agreed, raising an eyebrow. "And good luck."

"I know what you're thinking, Mrs. Skeptic, but I watched Joe Thompson operate the other day. He's a good surgeon."

"You mean the 'Ass with the Golden Hands'?" she

snarled.

"You don't like him?"

Helen shrugged and returned to her computer. "Should I give Mr. Cohen the good news?" she asked, absentmindedly fingering the small cross that hung from a very fine gold chain around her neck. "He pesters me daily about why we're not admitting patients."

"No, he'll find out on his own," he replied before returning to his patients.

At three o'clock that afternoon, Bascom returned to Helen's office. "Any news about Mrs. Gonzales?" he asked.

"No. Do you want me to call?" she asked, glancing up from the cabinet where she was filing a patient chart.

"No thanks. I'll walk over. I need the exercise," he replied, patting his stomach.

Minutes later he was in the admitting office.

"Mrs. Gonzales checked in three hours ago," the plump young receptionist explained with a smile marred by a gap between cracked front teeth.

"Three hours ago!" Bascom exclaimed, pounding a fist on the counter top. "Didn't my secretary ask you to call me after she was admitted?"

The smile quickly drained from her face. "Yes, and I told the nurse to call you," she answered.

"Where is she?"

The woman leaned forward and whispered, "In an empty patient room reading a romance novel and eating junk food."

"Not the nurse, Mrs. Gonzales!"

"Oh. She's in room twenty-two."

Bascom walked around Cohen's square doughnut to room twenty-two where his patient was curled up in bed, lightly massaging her abdomen. A red light flashed inter-

mittently on the wall above her bed.

"I want to go home," she said with a grimace as he entered her room. "No one answers my calls."

"Mrs. Gonzales, as soon as we complete your paperwork, I'll find out why no one has come to see you," he said, taking her chart from its metal holder at the foot of her bed.

"I hope so," she murmured, slowly rocking back and forth on her unmade bed. "My pain is much less now, and I'm afraid of this place. I want to go home."

"I understand, and I'll get you out of here as soon as I know for certain what is wrong in your belly."

As Bascom completed his notes, an obese nurse in a uniform stretched far beyond its intended capacity appeared in the doorway. He quickly crossed the room and shuffled her back into the hall.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Lunch," she replied glibly.

"Weren't you supposed to call me when Mrs. Gonzales arrived?"

"I've been busy."

"Doing what?"

"None of your business."

"I'll speak to your supervisor about this."

"Go ahead." She turned and slogged down the hall, muttering what sounded like, "Fuck you."

Bascom was livid. He did not believe nurses should be subservient to a doctor's every whim, but he did expect them to treat him respectfully and his patients professionally.

"Mrs. Gonzales," he said as he re-entered her room, still seething over his encounter with the rude nurse, "tomorrow morning we'll scan your belly. Now I'm going to talk with someone about your nurse." He jotted a note on a

slip of paper and pressed it into her hand. "This is my home number. Call me when you need me, day or night."

He returned her chart to its rack and went to the nursing supervisor's office. He knocked once on the open door and entered the cramped but tidy room without waiting for an invitation.

"I've got a problem," he said to Evelyn Cooper. The prim sixty-year-old slipped off her glasses and placed them squarely on her well-organized desktop.

"Please, Dr. Bascom," she said politely, indicating a warn leather chair in front of her desk. "How can I help you?"

"I've just had a run-in with a surly nurse," he said angrily. "I don't like to complain, but we can't improve patient care in this hospital if we let her do as she pleases. I would like you to send an incident report to Mr. Cohen, and to assign a different nurse to care for my patient."

"Her again," she sighed wearily. "Unfortunately she *can* do as she pleases around here since she's Mr. Cohen's sister-in-law. I can't fire her, even though I've tried. If you'll write the complaint, perhaps he'll listen to you."

"You've been through this before?" he asked.

"Lots of times. Normally she hangs around the nurses' off-duty room, eating and watching TV. Cohen pays her to do nothing, which is actually a lot safer for our patients.

“I'll have a different nurse care for your patient."

"Thanks," he said before leaving the office.

The next morning Bascom handed his complaint to the hospital administrator. Cohen skimmed it, held it by an edge for a moment, released it with a flick of his fingers, and watched it waft into the wastebasket beside his desk.

"There are things I can do, I can't do, or I won't do. This I won't do,” he explained. “*You're* in breach of con-

tract, however, since one admission was not what we had in mind when we hired you. The Board is already deciding what action it should take against you, and it won't be cheap. For you I mean. You should have returned to Italy when you had the chance," he said firmly.

"You're right, George, I should have," Bascom agreed before exiting the office.

When he arrived in Mrs. Gonzales's room, she was sitting up in bed, a red light was flashing behind her head, and blood was backing up into the plastic tubing in her arm.

"When did the IV run out?" he asked, avoiding her angry stare.

"A while ago. I put on my call light, but no one came."

"I see," he said simply. He took a tissue from a box on the nightstand, folded it into a square, removed the needle, and pressed it on her vein.

"Did they scan your belly this morning?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "My daughter wants you to transfer me to Phoenix."

"That sounds like a good idea. Hold your finger on this tissue until I get back," he ordered gently.

A lone technician with a chain tattoo encircling his right bicep was doing a crossword puzzle at his desk when Bascom entered the empty radiology department.

"Why didn't Mrs. Gonzales get her scan?" he asked the dark haired youth.

"Sonics International won't fix our busted scanner unless we pay in cash or with a cashier's check," he answered without looking up from his crossword. "Regular checks from this dump bounce."

Bascom shook his head in disgust. He returned to his patient, stopping at a nursing station along the way to make a telephone call and to pick up a band-aid and a cotton ball.

"Mrs. Gonzales, I'm transferring you to Phoenix where

we can get your studies done immediately," he said upon reentering her room. The woman sighed with relief as she watched him replace the tissue on her arm with a cotton ball and band-aid.

That evening, as Ben was ladling a pork stew into her bowl on the hand-carved, brightly painted table they had bought during one of their trips to Puerto Peñasco in Mexico, Evelyn asked, "Ben, did you hear what the new guy did today?"

"Quit?" he answered. "Four days would be a new record. The last one quit after a week."

"Not yet," she laughed. "He complained to Cohen about his sister-in-law, and since our scanner is down, as usual, he transferred his only admission to Phoenix."

Ben chuckled. "I told those bozos the unit was obsolete, but they wouldn't believe me.

"Cohen will never forgive him for criticizing his tubby sister-in-law, and transferring a patient from this place is a crime punishable by death. It looks like you'll lose our bet."

Evelyn smiled.

He sat next to her and lifted his glass of *horchata*. "To the most wonderful woman in the world," he toasted.

"I know what that means," she replied coyly. "I have a headache."

"I've got aspirin in the medicine chest," Ben retorted before digging his spoon into the stew.

"Thompson is throwing a welcoming party for Bascom in that shack of his next week. I think I'll go snoop around," he said as he tasted the hot stew. "Mm, one of my best. Just as my grandmother taught me."

"Too bad she never taught you modesty," she answered jokingly. "Don't wear your cotton jacket to the party. It has no space for new stains."

Chapter 4

A few days after transferring Mrs. Gonzales to Phoenix, Bascom shaved with a steady hand, dressed in his finest jeans, and went to a belated 'Welcome To Whitney" party in his honor at the home of the town's two surgeons, Joe Thompson and Marty Nevins. Thompson had made it clear that neither he nor his junior partner actually lived in the condominium, as it was small, run-down, and it damaged their image as well-to-do surgeons. He had described it as a "flophouse they bunked in on the days they had to stay overnight in crappy Whitney."

The flophouse was a few blocks from Bascom's house, and as he walked the short distance to it, lightning lit the skies, an increasing wind rustled leaves in the trees, and desert dust filled the air. In Italy the trees would be bare of leaves at this time of the year, but Arizona's ash and mesquite were still in bloom.

Bascom turned into Thompson's compound. The gatehouse, which stood forlornly between bent poultry fencing that lay on each side of it, seemed to have lost its purpose years ago. Spanish names and symbols unfamiliar to him had been spray painted above and below its broken windows.

Thompson's house, small multicolored structure with a slightly sagging roof, stood a hundred yards from the gate in a row of similar run-down dwellings. Fancy cars, out of

place on a street lined with rusting pick-up trucks and dented twenty-year-old sedans, were parked in front of his house. Rap music screeched from its open windows.

Aromas of tobacco and skunk, the latter not of animal origin, assaulted Bascom's nostrils as he crossed the threshold of the small living room. A young, well-dressed woman reeking of alcohol, bumped into him, spilling her drink on her skirt.

"Dr. Basscombbe," she slurred, "I've been dyyying to meet you. My place, later?"

"Much later," he said as he edged around her and walked over to Wiggins who was studying the myriad offerings at the long food table in the rear of the room. The old man had piled so much food onto the paper plate he was holding with one shaking hand, that it was bent toward his jacket. Bascom was certain that if he added the pickle he was trying to spear with a butter knife, the whole concoction would slide onto his multicolored uniform.

"Hi, Ben," he said cheerfully.

As the doctor turned to the voice, the potato salad slipped off his plate and into the pickle bowl.

"Oh! Hi, Bonely. Do you get it yet?" he asked.

"Get what, Ben?"

"Have you tried the meat loaf?"

"Nope, and I don’t think I will,” he replied, studying the amorphous brown lump sitting in the middle of a silver plate. “It smells like something you might find in a barn, and looks worse," he replied, sniffing the air. He glanced at the doctor's tray, lightened by its recent loss but still tilting towards disaster, and added, "I'd pour mustard on those cocktail franks. It goes well with that jacket."

Wiggins smiled.

"Where's Joe Thompson?" Bascom asked.

"In the kitchen."

Ben put his plate on the table and discreetly followed Bascom to the kitchen, stopping at the doorway, five feet from where Thompson and Marty Nevins were sitting, since he knew they would never talk openly about anything important in his presence.

Nevins, rolling a small glass of beer between his hands, looked up as Bascom entered the room.

"Hi, guys. Busy today?" Bascom asked as he dragged a metal chair from under the table, its rusted legs scratching softly against the worn linoleum covered floor.

"Usual stuff, Bob," sixty-year-old Joe Thompson replied. He was as wide as the table, making his surgical partner appear emaciated by comparison.

"I was at a private party in Phoenix," Nevins explained, fingering his gray, white, and black beard pocked with patches of barren skin. "Had to leave early to attend this bash in your honor. I hope you'll show your appreciation by sending me, I mean Joe and me, some patients."

Ben strained to hear the conversation over the din of the party-goers.

Bascom smiled, rocking on his chair. "Sure, maybe tomorrow, but today I'm here to ask you about the problems at our beloved Whitney Community Hospital."

"Which are?" Nevins leaned back and sipped his beer.

"The farmer's wife who died of a ruptured appendix is one," Bascom said.

"It happens," Joe said as he combed a few gray hairs over his vast scalp.

"It shouldn't when the patient is already in the hospital when it ruptures," Bascom rebuked.

Joe speared a large French-fry with his knife and slid it into his gargantuan mouth. Nevins whistled. "I was always curious to know how a dinosaur ate," he exclaimed in awe.

"Anyway, because of this place's lousy reputation,"

Bascom complained, ignoring the patter, "I transferred my only patient to Phoenix."

"Status quo." Joe nodding his huge head. "It's why we operate on almost all of our patients in Phoenix."

"Shouldn't we correct this situation?"

"Bob," Thompson explained, resting his knife on his plate, "others have tried and failed. If you think you can improve things here, maybe even convince Abe Grimes to stop performing hysterectomies on sixteen-year-olds, go right ahead, but I don't want to get involved."

"What?" Bascom barked, his eyes widening in disbelief. "Why would he do that?"

Son of a bitch has been doing it for years, Ben thought. *I couldn't stop him and I doubt you can.*

"To cure their irregular periods," Joe said with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"That's outrageous! All girls are irregular at that age," Bascom countered angrily. "They become regular as they get older."

"Everyone knows that," Joe agreed after sipping his coffee, "but wile Abe tells them they need surgery because they *might* develop cancer if they don't get their uterus and ovaries removed. Instant sterility, but only if they have cash. If not, he tells them the problem *might* disappear so he'll look like a genius when their cycles stabilize on their own, and sends them home."

"The guy should have his license pulled, or worse. Castration might be nice," Bascom bristled, thinking back to what Mrs. Gonzales's daughter had told him in his office. *The threat of developing cancer was simply a money-making scam. She was another victim of the bad medicine that seemed to have its epicenter in the Sonoran Desert.*

"Wiggins called in the state to stop him and paid the price for violating our code of silence. Not nice at all,"

Nevins explained with a yawn.

We could have stopped him if you cowards had stood with me. A young man holding a bottle of beer interrupted Ben's thoughts.

"Dr. Wiggins, how are you?" he asked.

"OK. Do I know you?"

"I'm a lab tech in the hospital." He frowned, upset the old man did not remember him.

"Oh, right," Ben apologized. "I didn't recognize you in the fog." *Now get lost. I need to hear what's going on in the kitchen.* "And how are you?"

"I'm fine. We don't get many orders from you anymore."

"I didn't know you had *ever* gotten many orders from me. Most patients don't need all those newfangled tests you people do," he said. *Now pleeze, go away.*

"Guess you're right, Doc. Well, it's nice to see you're up and around."

"As long as I can stand and pee in the morning, I'll have a good day. And I can still do both!"

The young man walked away, shaking his head as Ben edged closer to the doorway.

"…. Anyway, I won't stop Abe because I need him," he heard Nevins explain. "Almost every insured patient in this town is his, and his referrals are worth plenty." He drained the beer and put the empty glass on the table. "Tastes better warm (burp)," he explained as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Bob, we did strike once," Thomson said, patronizingly patting his colleague's arm. "Nothing came of it, except Cohen fired a contract doc who went bankrupt repaying his advances and interest. Whitnians didn't give a damn that we had gone out on a limb for them. They just went to Phoenix for care while we sat home and lost money.

"Striking will put only *you* in the line of fire. Cohen won't touch us because without the bones we throw him, no pun intended, this place would sink. Besides, my business is doing fine, and I like things just as they are."

"Joe, how would you like your mother to get the care these people get?" Bascom asked.

"She'd never come here, and don't try to play on my sympathies," he scolded, turning his palms up to silence Bascom.

"Then how about replacing Evelyn Cooper? We need someone who can fire Cohen's deadbeat relatives, and she can't."

Try it and see what happens to you, Dr. Bubbles! Ben silently warned his new colleague.

Thompson stabbed his meat loaf a few times, studied it for a moment, and then dropped his napkin over it. "Not a good idea. Cohen tried to fire her when she wanted to dump his sister-in-law, and again after she ratted on Grimes about the hysterectomies, but Wiggins forced him to back down in both cases.

“Don’t fool with Evelyn unless you want to face Ben’s wrath.

"They’re lovers," he added in a loud whisper. "She's a fine-looking woman for her age, but I doubt he can still get it up."

"Fat bastard! You should know what I can do!" Ben said loudly enough to get the attention of people standing nearby. He hoped Thompson had not heard him.

"Ev's a good supervisor and an excellent nurse," Nevins added, patting his beard. "She tries hard to improve conditions here, but Cohen undermines her authority, and he'll do the same to her replacement. Besides, firing her won't change anything."

"But decent nursing care is −−" Bascom protested.

"Look, I don't care what the nurses do!" Nevins interrupted with a shrug.

"Why did you become a doctor, Marty?"

"To get rich. It's the new Hippocratic Oath. 'Don't do surgery unto others unless they pay cash in advance 'cause insurance companies cut fees.'"

Bascom's anger bubbled like acid on limestone. "You're an inspiration, Marty," he said ironically.

"Joe," he asked the fat surgeon who had just lifted the corner of his napkin and was peering at the meat loaf to see if it had moved, "how do you make money in this town?"

"We do minor surgery in our office, you know, hernias, plastics, wound care, and biopsies on our lesser quality citizens. Plus we get referrals from the ED," he explained. “We make our real money operating in Phoenix on rich, insured patients.”

"So your definition of a ‘quality citizen’ is one who gets surgery in Phoenix instead of Whitney?" Bascom scowled, shaking his head in disbelief at his racist statement.

"As to referrals from the ED, I've gotten only a few."

"I'll bet they were uninsured migrants, right?" Nevins snickered and rubbed a finger over his lower lip.

"How did you guess?"

"It wasn't a guess. Ed Hunter skims the insured patients from the ED to his office and to his friends. He sends the uninsured really sick to Phoenix, and he sends the uninsured not-so-sick to you."

"That's a conflict of interest," Bascom said angrily. "Plus it's a violation of EMTALA, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act, to refuse to treat patients because they don't have insurance."

"Get real,” Nevins said, frustrated by Bascom’s continued tirade. “Our population is mostly illegal Mexicans, Fil-

ipinos, and Indians who can’t pay our fees. So why not let someone else take the loss?"

"That's bs, Marty," Bascom said irately as he ran a hand through his hair, stopping to scratch a spot behind his right ear.

"Maybe it is, but Hunter pretends the cases are too difficult for us to handle in this desert outhouse. So Phoenix University Hospital has to take them."

"So much for the law," Bascom uttered bitingly.

"Do I detect a touch of irony, Bob?" Thompson asked, looking down his nose at him.

"Irony? Hell no! Try anger or sarcasm. Do you expect me to compliment Hunter on his professional ethics and unbridled concern for his patients after what Marty just said?" Bascom replied. "What's your take in this referral scam, Joe?"

"It's not a scam. Hunter doesn't want surgical patients, so he sends us the gallbladders, broken bones and the like. Ninety percent of the people here are poor, but the remaining ten percent are rich, well-insured farmers and businessmen. Those we take to Phoenix, since they won't set foot in WCH. We toss Cohen the workman's comp cases and the rare illegal who foolishly thought he was saving his hard earned money for his kid’s education."

"I can't believe this," Bascom said, shaking his head. He picked up a plastic knife from the table and twisted it in his hands until it snapped in two. He tossed the pieces onto the middle of the table.

"You won't get referrals from anyone unless you play the game," Joe warned, shaking his finger at Bascom.

"By the way," Marty interrupted. "I spoke to Hunter about the guy with the cut arm that Perkins let die because he was busy caring for a man with a heart attack. The medical board reviewed the case and decided he needed a psy-

chiatric evaluation to see if he hates Mexicans."

"Perkins wasn't busy. He was reading a newspaper at the nursing station the entire time I was there," Bascom said angrily. "There were two patients in the ED that night, and he let mine bleed to death while his slept peacefully. Now you tell me all this murderer needs is a psyche consult?"

"Yup. And the board said he can continue working until he gets it. Which might be never."

Bascom banged his fist on the table. "Not gonna happen on my watch! Since you won't straighten out this place, I'll call in EMTALA, Medicare, the TV and the press."

Whoa! Ben thought. *Now we're getting somewhere. Ev might be right about this guy, if they don't drive him into the desert and kill him.*

"Don't do that!" Thompson pleaded. The color drained from his face and he began to sweat. "The fines would put the hospital out of business and I'd have to work in Phoenix full time. Competition is really tough there!"

"Then correct the abuses, and keep Perkins out of the ED." Bascom replied heatedly. "Sit on Cohen until he listens."

"I'll make sure Perkins doesn't get any more work, I promise," Joe pleaded. "Please don't call in the thugs from EMTALA!"

"I can't say I won't," Bascom said angrily as his beeper sounded its three note alarm. He read its message and stood from his chair. "I'd love to continue this stimulating conversation, but I'm wanted. Thanks for the lovely party. I feel so enlightened now that I understand your true concern for the people of this town, that I'll skip and whistle all the way to the hospital."

Ben turned from the doorway as Bascom brushed by him. The young physician fought his way out of the smoke

filled, crowded room, and walked to the ED where Victor Forest awaited his arrival. The frail sixty-seven-year-old was lying on a gurney and holding an oxygen mask to his face. Donna Franklin was slipping a catheter into his dusky blue forearm while a diminutive nurse measured his blood pressure.

"Hi, Donna," he said to the dark-haired nurse. "How's our patient?"

"Victor's unhappy, Dr. Bascom. Sick, very unhappy, and he hates us," she replied, her brown eyes sparkling behind her granny glasses.

"Why?"

"He's got severe lung disease, and is supposed to get no more than four liters of oxygen a minute, but last time he was here someone gave him fourteen. It shut down his breathing and almost killed him."

"Then he's got good reason to hate this place. Have you ordered blood gases yet?"

"The tech is on her way."

Turning to his patient, he asked, "How are you, Mr. Forest?" Victor opened his eyes, feebly lifted a blue finger, wiggled it twice, then dropped it back onto his mask.

Bascom listened to his chest with his stethoscope, then wrote orders on a chart, handed it to Donna, and went to the waiting room where Victor's overweight wife was wringing a blue handkerchief through her plump fingers.

"Tell me he'll be all right, doctor," the gray-haired woman pleaded as he approached her.

"I can't do that just yet. Victor is very ill and needs to stay in the hospital," he said softly.

"Not here!" the woman exclaimed, in wide-eyed fear. Two Mexicans sitting on old benches against a wall of the otherwise empty room looked curiously at them.

"He's too unstable to transfer, Mrs. Forest," Bascom

explained, turning his back to the inquisition. "He could die before he reached another hospital."

"Victor didn't want to come here," she said, shaking her head, "but the ambulance driver said he had to."

"The law requires him to bring patients to the nearest hospital," he explained patiently. "I promise you your husband will get the best of care."

"You'd have to walk on water to make me believe that," she said.

"I do," he laughed, "but only when it rains. I'll personally watch over him while he's here."

"You'd better," the woman warned, shaking a chubby finger at him.

They returned to Victor and explained their decision to keep him in Whitney. He stared at his wife a few moments, then mouthed "good-bye" through quivering lips to his lifelong mate before closing his eyes.

Donna had been called to intensive care while Bascom was speaking with Mrs. Forest, leaving Nurse Ruiz to care for his patient.

"I need to go to radiology, Miss Ruiz," he said. "Keep the oxygen at four liters per minute. Four, not fourteen. Do you understand me?"

"Jes," she replied vacantly without looking up from her charting.

"I'll tell our son," Mrs. Forest said, rummaging through her shopping bag sized purse for her cellphone. "You'll hear from him if anything goes wrong. He's a lawyer in LA."

"I'm sure we'll have a lot to talk about if he does call." Bascom turned to the nurse. "I'll be right back Miss Ruiz," he said before leaving the area.

When Bascom returned to Victor fifteen minutes later,

he heard a loud whistling sound escaping from under his mask, and raced to his stretcher. The nurse inexplicably had increased the oxygen flow to fourteen liters and the man was no longer breathing. He ripped off the mask, grabbed an endotracheal tube from the cart near the stretcher, expertly inserted it into Victor's windpipe, and attached it to an Ambu bag.

He rhythmically squeezed the bag, forcing air into Victor’s lungs, while a livid Mrs. Forest and the nurse quickly pushed his stretcher to the intensive care unit. Donna, writing notes on a patient’s chart at the nursing station, jumped to her feet when they crashed through the unit's double doors.

They maneuvered Victor's stretcher into the slot by the nursing station. Bascom could feel Mrs. Forest's angry glare on his back as he connected the respirator to her husband's endotracheal tube. After he and Donna finished attaching the rest of the life-support systems to the gravely ill man, Bascom turned to Mrs. Forest and explained that Victor might not survive the night.

"You’d better be wrong!" she threatened, as she picked up her husband's hand and tenderly squeezed it. Bascom and Donna sat at the nursing station.

"Third world hospitals are better than this one," he griped softly behind a hand he held in front of his face.

"I know. This place wrote the manual on how to screw up care. I didn't want to leave Victor, but I had to help with Dr. Thompson's patient," Donna explained, nodding to the woman on the stretcher next to Victor's.

"Ruiz is in the country illegally and I don't think she has a license. I complained to Cohen, but he warned me to keep my nose out of hospital business. Anyway I need to get back to the ED before she kills any more of my patients," she said, then whispered in an even lower voice,

"Good luck with Victor's wife. The Forests were a gang of train robbers and killers in the 1800s, and I don’t think they’ve become law-abiding since then. Don't let her gray hair and chubbiness mislead you."

Victor succumbed early the next morning, and his exhausted wife sobbed softly by his side as Bascom removed his endotracheal tube.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Forest," he said apologetically as he wrapped it in a towel and placed it on the stand next to the bed.

"You people killed him, as Victor predicted you would," she sobbed. "I shouldn't have listened to you! Now leave me alone with my husband!"

Bascom went to the nursing station to write a summary of events on Victor's chart. A few minutes later Mrs. Forest approached him. "I'm going to sue you and this lousy hospital," she warned, wagging a finger in his face. "You haven't heard the last of me, believe me!"

"I'm very sorry," was all he could say as she stormed out of the unit.

"Porco giuda, I've had enough!" he mumbled as walked to his office an hour later. "Doctors let patients die because they're Mexican, unlicensed nurses can't understand English, and lazy, fat ones do nothing. Not even Charles Dickens could have invented a setting like this.

"I'll call EMTALA, Medicare and Medicaid," he told himself, "and to hell with Thompson and Cohen!"

Chapter 5

Ben's phone rang later that morning while he was brewing a pot of coffee.

"Dr. Wiggins here," he said, out of breath from limping quickly to the living room to answer it.

"Hi, this is Donna."

"Well, hello! How are you?"

"Fine."

"Me too. Do you want to speak with Ev?"

"No," she answered, "Victor Forest died two hours ago."

"Victor? I saw him the other day."

"He told me. Dr. Hunter tried to call you last night, but he had to beep Dr. Bascom when he couldn't reach you."

"Drat! We were out shopping. I should carry that newfangled phone Ev bought me, but my arthritic fingers can't make it do what I want. What happened?"

"An unlicensed nurse turned up his oxygen, which shut down his breathing."

"Again. Was Dr. Bascom with him when he died?"

"Yes, and he’s steaming! He's almost as good as you, and did everything he could to save him. Victor’s wife threatened to sue him, the hospital, and me. And you know the Forests are gangsters."

Ben rubbed a bent finger across his lips, upset that Victor had died. Even though he had suffered for a decade, he

had survived many bouts similar to the one that had unnecessarily killed him.

"Donna," he said after a moment, "I'm not convinced Dr. Bascom is the savior you would like me to believe he is, but you make him sound competent, which is unusual in this town. Let's see what he does next."

That afternoon Bascom had just fallen asleep when his telephone jolted him awake. He had tried to see patients in his office after Victor's death, but a migraine headache had forced him to cancel appointments. He had returned home and crawled into bed, hoping to sleep through its worst symptoms.

"Hello, and please don't shout," he warned the caller. A noise louder than a whisper worsened his nausea and relentless pain.

"Migraine again?" Lance Berkford asked. He and Bascom had met in medical school and had worked together in an emergency department on the east coast where Bascom was chief of the service. Because of their uncanny ability to save even the most severely injured patients, they were known to the hospital staff as the "Trauma Twins."

The one patient they could not save was the most important person in Bascom's life, and he often dreamed he was holding his battered wife in his arms, and that Lance was whispering in his ear: "She's gone, Bobby."

"The usual. What's up?" Bascom replied. He sat on the side of the bed and rested his forehead on his palm.

"I just wanted to know how your job is working out."

"It sucks. Patients drop like flies and no one gives a damn, as long as they pay their bills first."

"Cohen never told me things were that bad," Lance clucked. "His offer seemed a good way for you to get back on your feet."

"In theory it was. I have a one-year contract, but repayment of his advances will be a bitch if I don't last that long. And I probably won't." Bascom yawned and stretched his shoulders. "I'll never forget the horrible problems we faced during our residency, and I don't look forward to a similar battle against these bozos. But they are screwing these patients, and I don't like it."

"Uh, oh! Trouble ahead! DQS! Don Quixote in Scrubs is back in action!" Lance said, tooting an imaginary trumpet after his last word.

"Lance! Ow!" Bascom barked. He was close to vomiting.

"What's wrong, Bob?"

"Worst headache I've ever had."

"*What?*"

"Sorry. It's not the worst," he replied quickly.

"Are you sure it's not an aneurysm? Your father died of one."

"No, it's just my usual migraine."

"I hope so," Lance said.

Bascom stuck his feet into the sheepskin slippers Cris had given him as a Christmas present years earlier. He wiggled the toe peeking through the torn stitching of the right slipper, then quickly covered it with his other foot. *Gotcha!*

"How are you doing?" Bascom asked. He lay back on the bed and pulled a pillow over his eyes.

"Great. I've got your old job as ED director. Every time administration denies one of my requests, I tell them you're coming back. It scares the hell out of them, and they give me what I want."

"I wish I had that power here. When are you coming to visit?"

"Not for a while, but I'll bring Rachael Polgreen with me when I do."

"Rachael? I thought you didn't date beautiful women." The pain was worsening. *Perhaps it is an aneurysm*.

"I don't, but I compromised in her case. I put a bag over her head when we're in the sack."

"Ha, ha!" Bascom grimaced. He tossed the pillow aside and squeezed his temples between his thumb and forefinger. It didn't quell the throbbing which he was sure would reach explosive force and scatter his brain around his still musty bedroom.

"Lance, it's been great talking with you, but I need to pick up a car."

"A Rolls?" he laughed.

"Sure," Bascom replied sarcastically. "I'd never own one even if I could afford it. My secretary has a friend at a Ford dealership, and he's got a used SUV in good shape.

"Can I call you back?"

"You'd damn well better! If I don't hear from you in twenty-four hours, I'll be on a plane out there."

"I'll live," Bascom said before hanging up. He went to the bathroom and swallowed two aspirins from a bottle in the medicine chest. He showered and dressed, then walked to the car dealership. An hour later, with the paperwork completed and his headache in remission, he drove his one-year-old red Explorer to Joe Thompson's office.

After Victor Forest's unnecessary death, he had decided to call in government watchdogs to examine the hospital's workings, and he wanted to warn Joe before he did.

An elderly woman behind a kneehole desk looked up as he entered the surgeon's empty waiting room. "May I help you?" she asked, removing her glasses. A gold chain attached to its temples held them on her sagging bosom.

"I'm Dr. Bascom," he answered with a quick smile.

"Oh, nice to meet you. Welcome to Whitney. The doctor will be with you shortly."

He walked around the room, examining the diplomas hanging on the walls. The largest parchment stated Thompson had graduated from Johns Hopkins University thirty years earlier. Another testified to his outstanding surgical performance at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

With these credentials, why is he in this dumpy town?

A door opened, and Joe, arms outstretched and a smile on his wide face, waddled toward him. "Come in, my friend," he said, clasping Bascom's shoulder with his huge hand. He led him into his spacious office and offered him a chair in front of a massive desk as he lumbered to the oversized captain's chair behind it. Bascom took his seat and scanned the tomes and memorabilia in the antique bookcases lining the walls of the room.

"What can I do for you today, Bob?" he asked, lowering his huge frame into the chair. It creaked ominously before falling silent.

"My patient died last night in the nosocomio," he replied wearily.

"I know. Another nursing screw-up," he said, pulling on his right earlobe which was tucked up into itself. It was a sign that his next words had a better than even chance of being a lie. "The news upset me too. Our anesthesiologist quit because he hasn't been paid in a month," he complained, "and Cohen replaced him with a nurse who speaks an undetermined language. We're out of supplies, and I had to operate in Phoenix five times this week instead of three."

"Life's a bitch," Bascom agreed coldly. "Did you know Ruiz might be here illegally and might not have a license?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. This state is full of illegals, and many have first-rate forged documents," he replied, shrugging his massive shoulders and causing his chair to creak more loudly than before.

“This chair whimpers like a whipped dog every time I

sit in it," he mumbled. He took a gold cigarette case from his pocket and placed it on the desk.

"I need to quit," he explained, tapping the case, "but I'm afraid it might stimulate my appetite. Quite a dilemma, don't you think? Do I save my lungs or my belly?"

"When your clothes don't fit anymore, buy a Damascan Jubba," Bascom snickered. "Of course the NSA might mistake you for a terrorist with an atomic bomb strapped to your belly if you wander too close to a government building, but that's the risk you face."

"You do have a talent for flattering people," Joe said, stung by the unkind reference to his weight. "You aren't an Asperger's, are you?"

"Why do you ask?" Bascom replied, amused by the question.

"Because you seem bright and are a royal pain in the ass."

"It takes more than that to qualify for Asperger's, but thanks for asking, since it would put me in the same class as Einstein, Beethoven, and a few other geniuses. But no, I'm not an Asperger's."

"Did you ask Cohen about this nurse?" Joe asked, opening and closing his cigarette case.

"Why bother? He knows she's illegal since he hired her," Bascom replied. "How many more patients need to die in that hellhole because nurses aren't nurses and can't speak English?"

On a shelf in the bookcase next to Thompson’s desk, Bascom spied a photograph of a young woman in running attire standing next to two other women on pedestals of unequal height. She looked familiar.

"If you doubt they're nurses, check their licenses before you entrust your patients to them," Thompson suggested.

"You mean the forged ones you just mentioned? Mind if I look at that picture?" Without waiting for an answer, he went to the bookcase and picked up the photo. "To Joe, with all my love, Helen," was scrawled across the bottom.

"Is this my secretary?" Bascom asked, studying the picture.

"Yes. She had just won an Olympic bronze medal for the five thousand meters," Thompson explained.

“Wow!” Bascom replaced the picture on the shelf and returned to his chair. "Interesting bit of history for this town. Anyway Victor should have died on his terms, not ours. We need to boycott the hospital. We could provide urgent care in our offices and send everything else to Phoenix until Cohen corrects the problems." Bascom leaned back and slowly ground a fist into his palm.

"I won't strike," Joe protested. “You work in your office, but I need an operating room to do my job. I lose money if we strike. You don't. And besides, it didn't work last time."

"You already drive back and forth from Phoenix on an almost daily basis, so how can it hurt? If WCH can't meet its responsibilities, it should close," Bascom griped.

"Strike then, Dr. Asperger," Thompson snickered. "I'll even paint the sandwich sign you can wear while pacing up and down in front of the hospital. How about, 'The End is Near,' on the front, and 'Kiss My Ass,' on the back?"

"Thanks for your understanding, Joe," Bascom replied sarcastically. "I *will not* subject my patients to risks, and I *will* change the way people do business around here, with or without your help."

"I'd suggest you wait until Abe Grimes's party next month before you cut off your balls. He's been in town forever. If you can convince him to stand with you, others might follow. Personally I'd give better odds on your out-

racing a cheetah in the African Savannah."

"A guy who performs hysterectomies on teenagers is not exactly a stalwart of the medical community," Bascom said, rising from his chair. “Why would anyone follow him anywhere?”

"That’s true, but it still might be worth getting at least one person on your side. He’s not the worst on the staff."

"That is very encouraging. I was curious to know if you would stand with me. Now I know you won’t," he said as he left the office.

Helen was working at her computer when Bascom arrived at her desk minutes later. "Still a runner?" he asked.

"What? Why no, not anymore," she stammered. "How did you find out?"

"I saw your picture in Joe Thompson's office."

Helen paled. "What else did that shit have to say about me?"

"Nothing. Gotta run," he said, continuing down the hallway as his prim and proper secretary mumbled obscenities he did not know existed in the English language.

Two days later, while prowling the halls of the hospital, Ben spied Joe Thompson, Marty Nevins, and George Cohen huddled in conversation outside the administrator's office. He joined the trio.

"Bascom told me he wants us to strike, George," Thompson said, waving his arms. "Yadda, yadda, yadda."

"The new docs always do," the administrator shrugged. "They talk tough, but run when I read them the riot act. This place is one of the ten worst hospitals in the country, and I can't get docs to work here without bullshitting them.

“Bascom didn't realize I was stoking his ego to make him feel important when I recruited him. I knew he wasn't

going to change anything, but I was hoping he'd stay sober long enough to admit four or five patients a day without killing them.

"He admitted only two, and then ticked me off by transferring one to Phoenix. It's not often we get an insured Mexican, and he just let her go!" Cohen made a smacking sound with his lips. "Plus he had the gall to ask me to fire my sister-in-law.

"I might have misjudged him, and that could be a problem," he added, shaking his head. "I threatened to make him repay my advances with legal fees and interest if he didn't follow our rules. It didn't faze him. He said he wouldn't admit patients just to improve my cash flow.

"When's this strike supposed to take place, Joe?"

"It won't. I told him not to do anything until Grimes's party next month. You know it'll turn out as it always does. I'll never strike, and neither will Abe. We would lose too much money."

Nevins laughed. "Don't you agree, Dr. Wiggins?" he asked.

Ben, his head cocked so he could see around his taped lens, nodded. He held a varicolored handkerchief in front of his jacket, uncertain as to whether he should add a new stain to it, or to remove an old one from it.

"Yup," he said without looking up. "It sounds like you've got everything under control. The poor bastard won't know what hit him." *And I'm beginning to think you don't know what you're in for either.*

Chapter 6

On the night of the party at Abe Grimes's home, six months after Bascom's arrival in Arizona's Sonoran desert, Ben donned his hastily food-stained tuxedo jacket, knocked on Evelyn's door, and entered her small, tidy home. He found her leaning heavily on a chair in the living room, a hand pressed to her chest. Her shoulders were slumped forward, her hair unkempt, and dark circles surrounded her lifeless eyes.

"Ev, what, what's wrong?" Ben yelled, running over to her. He put his arm around her shoulders and lifted her face to his.

"Nothing, I'm just tired," she said, listlessly.

“You don’t look, ‘just tired,’” he protested, as he turned her in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. "You've been acting strangely for the past few weeks. You're always tired. You even had trouble lifting a pot off the stove the other night."

"It's nothing," she replied, gently pushing him away. “Have a seat. I'll be ready in five minutes."

Thirty minutes later Evelyn returned to the living room wearing an elegant white sleeveless gown adorned with a strand of black pearls. Her hair was tied up in a tight bun, and judicially applied make-up had restored color to her wan features.

Ben stood from his chair. "You're more beautiful then

ever," he said, half lost in thought. *Something is wrong with her, but what?*

"Are you sure you're OK? You'll tell me if something's wrong, won't you?" he pleaded, forcing a smile he hoped would allay his fears.

"I'm fine, Ben, and yes, I'll tell you."

They left the house and walked arm in arm to Ben's old Buick. They stopped to wish on a falling star in the clear night sky before he helped her into the passenger seat and closed the door. He then went around to his side of the car, and following a long practiced ritual, kicked his door twice and smacked its lock once before he could pull it open.

“Phew! Lucked out again,” he said before slipping onto the driver's seat. The door creaked defiantly on its rusted hinges as he slammed it shut. He put the key into the ignition and turned it. The Fireball 8 engine sputtered and died. He tried a second and a third time before he could coax it to life.

"Don't you think it's time to trade in this buggy for a new car?" Evelyn laughed.

Ben was relieved to hear her laugh. "Fred says he can keep her running a while longer," he replied. "No need to trade up just yet."

"If he keeps cars alive as long as you keep patients alive, you'll never get rid of this relic. Brr, it's cold tonight," she said, reaching for a lever on the dashboard. She tried to slide it into the full heat position, but it had rusted in place.

"So much for heat," she lamented, then rubbed her arms with her hands to warm them. "Why are we going to this party? Since you and Abe don't even speak to each other anymore, socializing with him seems odd."

"He didn't invite me, his wife did. I would have ignored the invitation, but Dr. Bascom is going to try to convince Grimes to join a doctors' strike, at least according to

Thompson. It should be a fun night."

Ben's old Buick sputtered to a stop behind a row of Mercedes and Jaguars in the semicircular driveway of Abe Grime's rambling Tudor mansion. The white, half-timbered home would have gone unnoticed in Beverly Hills, but among Whitney's dust-cloaked shacks, some held together with bailing wire and duct tape, it was like a medieval castle surrounded by wooden cruck houses plastered with daub and wattle.

Only Grimes and his bookkeeper knew the number of phony treatments and unnecessary hysterectomies he performed each year to earn the income he needed to support his wanton lifestyle. Ben's warnings to patients over the years about his colleague's unethical behavior had had little effect on them. They loved the attention Abe showered on them, and did not mind paying the excessive fees he charged for his snake oil therapies.

Ben and Evelyn exited the car and crossed the gravel driveway. He took her arm to steady her as they climbed the spiral staircase to the front door. A strain from Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* followed his tap on the lighted button on the wall next to it. Abe Grimes, a tall man in his seventies with white hair and a tanned, deeply lined face, opened the door. He wore a handmade tuxedo with a coat of arms he had bought from an online genealogical research society stitched onto its jacket’s breast pocket.

"Wiggins! How unpleasant to see you again. Actually I had hoped you wouldn’t come. My wife invited you by mistake."

"It's wonderful to see you too, Grimes," Ben scowled. "I didn't want to come, since even the thought of seeing you enjoy your ill-gotten treasures and your phony heritage,” he said, tapping Grimes’s tuxedo’s pocket, “nauseates me, but Evelyn insisted. So here we are."

"Don't stay too long," Abe warned, stepping back from the door. "The food and decently dressed guests are in there," he added, flicking his hand towards a crowded ballroom. "Feel free to add any of my exotic food offerings to your jacket."

As Ben and Evelyn entered the ballroom, a few well-dressed doctors and their wives turned briefly toward them before haughtily returning to their private conversations.

"I'm tired, Ben, do you mind if I sit over there?" Evelyn asked in a hoarse whisper, pointing to a well-upholstered Victorian chair in a corner of the room.

"Sure," he replied. "Fat Thompson is filling his face at the bar. I'll just find out if the strike is on, and then we'll leave."

She walked to the chair and Ben went to the bar where the surgeon was sitting on two stools and stuffing handfuls of peanuts into his cavernous mouth. He asked the bartender for a glass of red wine and clapped Thompson on the back.

"What's the word on the strike, Joe?" he asked.

"There won't be one," he spit out partially chewed peanuts as he mumbled his reply. "Cohen sold the hospital."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding. A bunch of government agencies stormed the place. Cohen had to sell it because he couldn't pay the fines."

"The District Board didn't bail him out?"

"It's bankrupt. It spent its last dime on the CT scanner, and it's not going to get its money back."

Why am I not surprised? "Who bought it?" Ben asked.

"A guy from San Francisco."

"That's great!" Ben exclaimed. "Maybe he'll improve the situation here."

"Doubt it," he said, shaking his head. "From what I hear, he's ruthless. If Bascom thinks he can cause trouble with this guy in command, he's in for a big surprise."

"So far we've had the big surprises," Ben said with a chuckle. "You said Bob had a drinking problem. He's been here six months, and I've never seen him drunk nor heard about his drinking from anyone. Have you?"

"No, I haven't, either," Joe said thoughtfully. Then, like a dog nosing its empty bowl to its owner, with slight nods of his head he asked the bartender to refill the ornate silver plate with peanuts.

"We've had dinner together a few times, and all he drank was coffee," he continued as he hungrily watched the bartender pour a few peanuts onto the plate before screwing the top back on their glass container. Joe took the jar from him and emptied it onto the plate.

"Perhaps I just dreamed up his addiction," he said before placing the jar upside down on the bar.

"Sure. How's the lox?"

"Oily."

"'Scuse me," Ben said. He took his wine glass, went to the end of the bar, and picked up a strip of pink salmon from a wooden plate. As he was holding it above his wide-open mouth, waiting for it to stop swaying so he could release it and let it slip seal-like down his gullet, wine from the tilted glass he held waist high dribbled down his tuxedo pants.

"Hello, Ben," Bascom said, tapping the old man on the shoulder. He would not condescend to Grimes's "formal attire required" request on the invitation, but he did buy a new pair of jeans to wear with a freshly ironed sport shirt and a wrinkled woolen jacket.

"Enjoying the party?"

"Er, yes," he answered. He straightened up quickly, the

lox smacked against his forehead, and he stopped pouring wine down his pants.

"Oh, it's you, Bristol. Do you get it yet?" the old man asked with a smile. He put his glass and the lox on the bar, picked up a napkin, and dabbed it on his forehead.

"Get what?"

"Did you come alone?"

"Yes."

"Too bad. You need a friend. Love lubricates all body parts," Ben said, pointing across the room to Evelyn, who was dozing in the Victorian chair. "How I love that woman. She stirs me to savagery. Grr," he said softly. He rubbed the napkin on the wine stain on his pants, leaving white particles in its wake, and then, as Abe Grimes approached, turned and tottered towards Evelyn, stopping momentarily to eavesdrop on the conversation between his nemesis and Bascom.

"The old fool is proof we need euthanasia to rid the world of trash," Ben heard him say coldly. "Are you enjoying yourself, Bob?"

"I was until now," Bascom responded curtly, irritated by the callous remark.

Good answer, Ben thought as he continued on his way.

"I hear you lost Victor. *I* couldn't have saved him either," Grimes said haughtily, glancing at Bascom's casual dress. "But even without him, you'll soon be earning enough to buy a Mercedes *and* some new clothes. By the way, I won't strike. The hospital is fine as it is. Good luck in your next job, if you don't follow our rules, that is," he added over his shoulder as he left to join his foppish guests.

"Testa di cazzo! Scratch a tux, get shit under your nails," Bascom fumed as he sat next to Thompson.

"Well, Joe," he said before ordering a diet drink from the bartender, "you were right. Abe won't strike. I wasn't

faster than your cheetah. He needs a lesson in manners though. He's a biased prick who would sell his mother into slavery for five bucks."

"Two bucks would be enough," Joe laughed. "He'd exhume his grandmother and force her into prostitution for five. Anyway, I have news, although with your crusader's attitude, I'm sure it'll be only a temporary reprieve." He raised his wine glass, swirled its contents for a second, then drained it in two noisy gulps, spilling a few drops on his vest.

"Taking lessons from Dr. Wiggins?" Bascom quipped.

"The Board sold the hospital," he mumbled while brushing the wine off his vest.

"How do you know?" Bascom asked, wondering what effect it would have on him. He had stopped admitting patients to the hospital following Victor's death, and Cohen had given him an ultimatum: admit patients or repay his advances with interest. Two weeks earlier his threatening phone calls had mysteriously ended. Bascom had no idea why, but he still would not admit healthy patients to the hospital, and he had no intention of leaving his office unless it collapsed over him, which he feared it would on days when howling winds blew sand through the cracks around the windows and doors and onto hapless patients sitting in its path.

"Government agencies stormed the place and found violations they seemed to have prior knowledge of. Would you know anything about that?" he asked with a beady eye on Bascom to watch his reaction to the veiled accusation.

"Would it surprise you if I did?" he answered, scratching a spot on the side of his forehead.

"No, it wouldn’t. Only you would have the balls to follow through where others have only threatened. You lucked out though. If some people hadn't welcomed the investiga-

tion, you would have become just another obnoxious Whitnian who got lost in the desert." Joe let out a sonorous belch.

"Can I have a refill, in a bigger glass?" he asked the bartender as he pushed the empty wine glass across the bar. The man shook his head as if to ask, "How about a trough?"

"From what I hear," Thompson explained, "the Feds fined the hospital two hundred thousand dollars for letting a Mexican bleed to death in the ED. They fined Perkins one hundred thousand dollars and put him on a lifetime probation for the same reason. Plus they billed the hospital another hundred thousand bucks for hiring an unlicensed nurse, who just happened to be Victor Forest's nurse."

"My, my. There must be less costly ways to learn correct behavior, don't you think?" Bascom mused before sipping his soda.

"Dunno. Anyway, Cohen couldn't pay the fines that resulted from their investigation, so he sold WCH for a song to a guy named Davidson from San Francisco."

"That's great news!" Bascom exclaimed, rolling his glass between his hands. *But is it? Il diavolo che conosci è meglio di quello sconosciuto – the devil you know is better than the one you don't.* He would have preferred Cohen and the hospital board make the changes, and not some unknown San Franciscan who might make the situation worse than it already was.

"What do you mean by 'temporary reprieve'?" he asked.

"If the new owner makes a mistake, according to your antiquated morality, Dr. Asperger, you'll be all over him. But if the rumors I hear about this guy are true, you'll end up a squashed bug on the system's windshield. He's a major prick that does not tolerate insubordination. He makes Co-

hen look like a gay Boy Scout."

"Cohen may be gay, but he's only a Cub Scout. Optimism isn't you're forte, is it, Joe?" Bascom asked, shaking his head at the bartender's silent offer to refill his glass.

"No, Bobby boy, it isn't. Realism is. You're a misguided idealist playing in the wrong league. You were lucky this time, but if you don't change your interfering ways, you'll learn hard lessons about how this system works. Davidson might be the one to teach them to you, unless he's mellowed into a devout churchgoer."

"That's all that's lacking in this conservative hellhole – someone who preaches faith and morals but rapes sheep for a hobby. I'm optimistic about Davidson, but if he isn't what I hope he is, I'll still uphold the ethics of the profession, no matter what the consequences," Bascom stated before leaving to find Cohen.

He stopped the administrator as he was leaving the party with a purloined bottle of champagne under his arm.

"Did you sell the hospital, George?" he asked excitedly.

"We'll know in a couple of weeks. The Board has decided to give you a temporary reprieve until then," he answered mysteriously before exiting into the mellow evening.

Temporary reprieve. It was a catchy phrase, but hearing it twice in two minutes from two different characters was not coincidental. Bascom mulled over his conspiracy theory as he made a round of the food tables, wrapping and stuffing delicacies into his pockets before quietly slipping from the social gathering.

Bascom tried to read a medical journal as he lay in bed that night, but the thought of the impending hospital sale elbowed the dry facts from his mind. He put it aside and slept

until his telephone roused him at two a.m.

"You've got a patient," the clerk said brightly.

"One of mine?" he asked groggily.

"No. It's one Dr. Hunter won't admit because he's uninsured."

"I'm on my way," he said as he rolled out of bed.

Ten minutes later Bascom entered the busy ED and walked over to its gray-haired chief standing by a patient who was bleeding from a jagged cut in his forehead.

"Hi, Ed. It looks like you're busy tonight," he said, fanning a hand around the ward.

"It makes it go by faster," Hunter smiled.

"Got a minute?"

"Sure," he said, turning from his patient.

"Why are the few referrals you send me always uninsured?" Bascom asked. Hunter's smile quickly disappeared.

"Coincidence," he explained lamely.

"Or could it be because you send the insured patients to your office and don't want the rest?"

"Listen, Bascom," he replied angrily, "what I do in my ED is my business. Now if you'll excuse me," he huffed before returning to his patient. Bascom sighed and went to see his.

"Hi, Mr. Dodd," he said, pulling a plastic curtain around the man's stretcher. "I'm Dr. Bascom. What brings you in tonight?"

"When I flopped nude on a chair, a Coke bottle accidentally went up my ass," the thin man whispered, massaging his stomach. A woman on a nearby stretcher laughed.

Bascom frowned at the invisible intrusion. He was no longer surprised or scandalized by anything a patient told him. His only lament was that the oddest cases always arrived in the middle of the night.

He pulled on a rubber glove from the stand next to the stretcher, greased a finger with K-Y jelly, and had his patient pull down his pants and roll on his side.

"This might be uncomfortable," he warned as slipped his finger into the patient's rectum. The man moaned as Bascom scratched the smooth end of the bottle with his fingertip. He could not coax it out.

"Mr. Dodd," he explained as he pulled off the glove, "I'm going to call in someone who can remove this."

He dropped the glove into the bio-hazard trashcan on the way to the nursing station and dialed a number on a phone on the desk. A sleepy voice answered.

"Joe," Bascom said, "I need you in the ED."

"Can't you send the patient to Phoenix?" Thompson asked hopefully.

"Nope. Your buddy here could have, but I can't."

"I'll be over."

The disheveled surgeon lumbered into the emergency department thirty minutes later and joined Bascom at the patient's stretcher. After positioning Mr. Dodd on his side and donning a latex glove, Joe ordered, "Bob, push in and down on his abdomen when I tell you."

Thompson inserted a lubricated finger into the man's rectum, and he moaned like a love struck coyote. The woman on the next stretcher howled with laughter.

"Push," the surgeon said, rotating his meaty finger in the patient's rectum. "More, more," he urged. "One more push, and, ah, finally," he said, holding up the curved glass bottle.

"Mr. Dodd, I'd suggest you drink Coke from a can from now on. G'night," he cautioned before leaving the cubicle with Bascom. He pulled his glove over the bottle and deposited them both in a trashcan.

"Are we through?" he asked tiredly.

"I guess not everything goes better with Coke," Bascom quipped as they walked to the office with the patient's chart.

Thompson rolled his eyes.

"Write your note and I'll take care of the rest," Bascom said, handing the chart to his colleague before they sat in worn chairs in front of an old table that bore numerous scratches and circular stains over its faded surface.

"Thanks for coming."

"Like I had a choice," Thompson countered.

"That was an interesting party tonight," Bascom said, ignoring the gripe.

"Bunch of rich phonies, but you never know when you'll need them," Joe explained as he scribbled his report across the page.

"Or when they'll screw you. How did Grimes get so rich?"

"It'll piss you off, but he invents diseases and phony treatments to keep his patients coming back. They're creative and convincing enough to have earned him almost a million dollars last year, at least according to rumors."

"How much?" Bascom gasped.

"I know it sounds incredible, but I've heard from a few people that it's true. Here," he said, handing the chart to Bascom. "Good night."

Bascom added his own notes, discharged the patient and returned home. Sitting on his bed holding Cristina's photograph, he traced her blond hair with his finger. "Buona notte, tesoro," he said, before replacing the photo on the nightstand. "Mi manchi e t'amo moltissimo."

The rising sun was brightening his room as he pulled the covers over his head.

Chapter 7

After weeks of speculation about the identity and imagined peculiarities of Whitney Hospital's mysterious new owner, some of which required the human body to contort itself into positions its maker had never intended, the staff met the San Franciscan in the boardroom at noon on Friday May 13. That day George Cohen was conversing with a man he towered over by six inches as employees arrived to hear his welcoming speech.

Donna stood in the entry to the small, sparsely furnished room for a moment, glanced in the direction of her boss, then walked over and sat next to a colleague at the oak table in the middle of the room, attracting the attention of every male, and two females along the way. The elderly nurse handed her a manila folder, one of a dozen piled haphazardly in the center of the table.

Ben entered next wearing the cotton jacket he had stained with fresh cranberry juice the night before. He said *hi* to Donna, who winked at him, then picked up a folder from the table and took a seat close to Cohen and the balding, foppish individual in his mid-fifties with whom he was conversing. Under the vest of his tailored, three-piece pinstriped suit, the new-comer wore a Birdseye white checkered shirt. A platinum and black tie was pinned to it by a dazzling diamond, and gold links flashed from its cuffs, one of which was caught under a gold Rolex watch. Thin-

soled, highly shined Italian shoes completed the image of a ruthless king who would walk on his prostrate subjects to keep from muddying them.

Due to his short stature and opulent attire, Ben dubbed him "natty mouse."

Cohen usually wore wrinkled slacks and an outlandish sport shirt he never tucked into them, as if he worked in a carnival rather than a hospital, but today he fidgeted nervously in an ill-fitting pinstriped suit. A too wide, loosely knotted, black tie caused the tips of the collar of his starched white shirt to flare upwards, poking his double chin whenever he turned his head.

Ben could hear the tremor in his voice as he spoke to the dandified stranger. The administrator's metamorphosis from a loudmouthed, former boxer with terrible taste in clothes, to a demure, stuttering poster boy for a clothing store both amused and worried him. Joe Thompson had warned him not to cross the new owner. Cohen's timidity seemed to confirm his caution.

Bascom entered the room a few minutes later and walked toward Cohen. "Dr. Bascom," the sycophant gushed as the young doctor approached, "this is Dr. Simon Davidson, our new owner."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Bascom said as the men shook hands. He studied his new owner for a few moments, then wrinkled his nose as if he had walked into a rest room where all the toilets had just overflowed.

"I'm pleased to meet *you*, doctor," the dapper figure corrected. He frowned at Bascom's jeans and sport shirt before fanning his hands down and away from his shoulders, as if to show how a respectable physician should dress.

"Hum, Bascom, Bascom," he mumbled thoughtfully as he unbuttoned and buttoned his dark blue cashmere and mohair jacket. "I've heard that name before. Yes, now I re-

member!” he said, shaking a finger at him. “You're the doctor who complained to the government about conditions here."

Bascom shrugged.

"You'll *not* do that again," Davidson warned, still wagging his finger in Bascom’s face as if he were a wayward schoolboy. "I will buck no insolence from you or anyone else on my staff. You *will* work with me to make this hospital into the excellent institution it should be, and you *will* do it without unwanted publicity, or you *will* leave. Am I clear?"

"You'll have no trouble from me as long as patient welfare and economically accessible care remain our primary goals," Bascom replied coolly before turning and walking away from his new owner.

Ben smiled. *Tit-for-tat. This boy wouldn't back down from the devil himself.*

Davidson rubbed three fingers across a black eyebrow. "The economic viability of this hospital is my concern, not yours. You hear me?" he shouted after the upstart in a voice which attracted the attention of everyone in the room except Joe Thompson. The giant was snoring softly in his chair.

"I'm not deaf," Bascom replied without turning around.

"You think he's a nice guy?" she asked Bascom as he sat next to her at the table.

"As nice as Dracula," he replied.

"Then you'll hate this even more, Doc," she said, tapping the folder in front of her.

"I love surprises," he grinned, taking one from the center of the table.

"I’ll bet. I'm having a dinner party at my house in a week. Join us?"

"I’d love to, Donna, but I'll be fishing in Puerto

Peñasco then. How about a rain check?"

"Sure," she smiled.

"Thanks."

Bascom opened his folder. "Dr. Simon Davidson's Rules and Regulations for Physicians in the Modern World," was typed in boldface across the top of its single document. The first rule was, "Physicians shall not wear sports shirts, jeans, or sneakers while on duty." He closed the folder. Clearly, Cohen had talked about him to Davidson before the meeting, and the new owner had perceived him to be an obstacle to whatever his plans were for the hospital. He felt the clothing diktat was simply a narcissist's attempt to control his enemy, and it was probably the first of many to come.

"L'abito non fa il Monaco, Donna," Bascom said. "Clothes don't make the man." He knew he would never exchange his comfortable wardrobe for a suit whose pinstripes reminded him of elitist prison garb.

Cohen and Davidson went to the head of the table where a water pitcher, glasses, pen and notepad were aligned with military precision. George tapped his pen against a glass and announced solemnly, "I'd like you to meet our hospital's new owner, Dr. Simon Davidson."

A halfhearted applause followed as Davidson stretched to his full Napoleonic height and bowed slightly, as if he were granting an audience to peons working in his garden.

"Thank you for your kind welcome," he said, scanning his audience. "I am a doctor, but I haven't practiced for a decade, and I am now in hospital management." He paused and frowned at Joe Thompson who was snoring in his chair, a victim of his Pickwickian girth.

"Harrumph. If I may have your attention, doctor," he said, tapping his pen on the table. The startled surgeon rubbed his eyes with his meaty paws, and smiled sheepishly

at Cohen.

"Thank you," Davidson said. "New equipment is on its way. Should any of you have special needs, Mr. Cohen will take care of them immediately. Also, we'll advertise for competent nurses." He extended a hand and George placed a glass of water in it. He sipped it, handed it back, and then pulled his jacket sleeve back to one centimeter above his shirt cuff.

"Any comments?" He was smiling as he asked for them, but his tone suggested there was no need for any.

Bascom raised his hand.

"Yes, doctor?"

"I have two comments. First, you should give Evelyn Cooper the authority to discipline the nurses under her."

Ben bolted upright when he heard her name.

"That must include her right to fire those she considers unfit to practice. She can't now, and our patients receive poor care as a result."

"Write that down, George," Davidson ordered. The administrator obediently scribbled a note on his pad.

"Next," the new owner said.

No crisis, Ben thought as he settled back in his chair.

"Ed Hunter refers all the paying patients from the emergency department to his own clinic, and he sends the indigent to me. I don't mind caring for them, but it's a conflict of interest. He should run the ED or his clinic, but not both."

"Thank you, doctor," Davidson agreed. "I'll look into your requests. Any other comments?" When he received none, he said with a flick of his outstretched hand, "All dismissed."

Bascom expected him to paraphrase John F Kennedy's presidential acceptance speech, "Ask not what Whitney Community Hospital can do for you, but what you can do

for …me," but the pinstriped general simply spun on his heels and exited the room with Cohen stepping gently on his shadow.

Bascom reopened his folder and glanced at the list of Davidson's rules for a new social order. *Good luck with this list,* he thought before drawing a line through it. He scribbled his name across the cover and tossed it to the center of the table.

Ben stood, stretched, and quietly left the room.

"I just met our new owner," he later told Evelyn in her office.

"And?" she asked, looking up from behind her desk. She had been writing in her leather bound diary, as she did everyday at about the same time. She closed it over her pen and leaned back in her chair.

"And he's bad news. I can smell a rat at fifty yards, and he's the worst I've ever smelled. I have the feeling the guy will bankrupt this town, and enjoy doing it.

"What I thought interesting was the dress code Davidson wrote in his rules and regs order. Cohen had obviously warned Davidson before the meeting that Bascom would be a problem, so 'natty mouse,' as I named him, decided to strike the first blow. Bascom will ignore it. A well-dressed doctor is no more competent than one wearing jeans. In fact you could dress some of the bozos here in gold lame, and I still wouldn't let them treat my dog. If I had one."

Evelyn laughed.

"Davidson should pick his battles more carefully though. Bascom is no pushover."

"Did he talk about the hospital's future?" Evelyn took the pen from her diary, closed and locked it, and put its tiny key in her purse.

"Yes, but I didn't believe a word he said. I did like it

when Bascom asked him to let you discipline your nurses. It's what I've been saying for years."

"True, but George– –"

"Forget George," Ben interrupted. "He's already natty mouse's puppet. He'll obey orders. I don't know what Davidson will tell him to do with you, since you'll also be a problem for him. Bascom wants him to empower you, but he might order Cohen to fire you instead."

"I'm ready to go, Ben. I'm tired and old. This is a young person's job," she said with a sigh.

"Old?" he repeated. He loosened his tie before walking over and gently pulling her to her feet. He wrapped her in his arms, hugging her tightly. "You're not old, not by my standards anyway." He tapped the tip of her nose with his finger. "And you're a great nurse."

"If I'm great, it's because you taught me."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. I love you." He kissed her neck before releasing her and sitting on the edge of her desk. "Bascom also said Hunter has to go – conflict of interest."

Evelyn laughed and sat back down. "Hmm. I wonder where I heard that before?"

"Not from me," Ben winked. "I'd better get out of here. See you for dinner tonight? I'm cooking your favorite, pollo oaxaca."

"Um, I can't wait."

"Good. See you at eight."

Ben ran into Bascom in the hallway outside Evelyn's office.

"You and Ev having some fun?" he asked mischievously.

"None of your dang business, Blofeld!" Wiggins winked as he straightened his polka dot tie

"You missed the meeting," Bascom chided.

"You were too caught up with Davidson to notice," he said, limping away. "I was there, even though I don’t like wasting valuable time listening to a pissant droll on about how wonderful he thinks he is." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed it vigorously over his bald pate as he continued down the hall.

"Watch out for the static electricity, Ben," Bascom warned.

"Do you get it yet?"

"Get what?" he asked. But Ben had already turned the corner and did not answer.

Chapter 8

A few weeks after meeting the new caliph of the medical harem in Whitney, Bascom moved his practice to a hundred-year-old brick building six blocks from the hospital. It was 112 degrees in the shade that day, and the only sign of life in the desert town, apart from Bascom in shorts and a sweaty T-shirt packing office equipment and patient records into a U-Haul trailer, was a Mexican teenager mowing a lawn. He was wearing a hoodie, had a towel wrapped around his neck, and apparently was immune to heat stroke.

Cohen had called him shortly after Davidson's meeting, and this time, instead of threatening lawsuits, he assumed the tone and tact of a friendly advisor. He gently reminded him that he had not seen any of his patients in a long while, but hoped Bascom would again admit them to WCH, especially since Dr. Davidson had graciously agreed to honor his contract, even though he had not.

Bascom had promised he would think about his request, and he did so for the entire time it took him to hang up his phone. He had sensed at their first meeting that he and his new owner would never be more than friendly enemies, and had decided to move on his own rather than face eviction later. Cohen, however, instead of just writing off the rental income from the ramshackle building the hospital owned, now would have to pay Bascom’s new landlord’s

rent for the next six months.

What concerned him more than eviction, now an impossibility, was the repayment of the fifty thousand dollars he had already received from the hospital. That amount would double over the next six months, and unless he remained on staff for one year, he would have to repay it all with interest. It was a serious concern since he was not a businessman-physician, and he knew it would take him a lifetime to repay his debt.

To the casual observer, Bascom seemed to be prospering in the little town. His waiting room was always full, but since he never charged the destitute, never performed laboratory studies or procedures "just to be sure," and never had patients return "just to see how they were doing," his income, in reality, was modest. Even with Cohen's supplementary checks, he occasionally had to delay payment of a few of his monthly bills.

At a meeting a month after Davidson’s arrival in Whitney, Hunter was fired and the staff elected Bascom emergency department director. Since it was an administrative position, he simply would be required to resolve day-to-day problems, and to evaluate the quality of care patients received there.

Even though he would not be treating patients, he still would be returning to the environment he loved. He eagerly looked forward to it.

In the middle of July, two months after Davidson's takeover of the hospital, and a day after he returned from a dermatology conference in San Diego, Bascom ran into Donna Franklin in a hallway of WCH.

"Have you heard?" the beautiful nurse asked, tapping a knuckle against his chest.

"Heard what?" Bascom, looking over her shoulder,

saw a janitor distractedly pushing his cleaning cart directly towards her. He grabbed her shoulders to move her out of its way, and she stumbled onto him.

"Excuse me," she said unrepentantly before smoothing her uniform. Bascom smiled.

"Anyway, after Davidson fired Hunter, he hired two docs from San Francisco to run the ED."

"Two to replace one? That's unnecessary. He's got plans we don't know about. But I wonder why he didn't tell me?" Bascom shook his head. "As its director, I need to know these things. Anyway, how are they?"

"One is OK, the other is the worst I've ever worked with. He orders twice as many tests as Hunter did, and he's unquestionably incompetent. I complained to Cohen, but he said docs, just to be safe, always order unnecessary studies, and to keep my nose out of hospital business."

"Greedy fools," he mumbled, rubbing his hand through his hair. "'Just to be safe' is an excuse doctors use to justify the unnecessary examinations they order on unsuspecting patients. A history and physical are all a competent doc needs to arrive at a diagnosis he can then confirm with a single laboratory test," Bascom explained.

"Besides, ordering 'all the tests' is misleading, since doctors order the same ones no matter what their patient's symptoms. They're useless in rare or unusual diseases that require specific testing. To make matters worse, naive patients who believe 'the more tests their doctors order, the more competent they are,' unwittingly encourage the practice.

"Well, Donna, it's been great being bumped into by you," he said with a grin. "I gotta run."

"Me too. Come visit when you get the chance," she yelled over her shoulder while hurrying down the hall. "I mean in the ED, of course."

Bascom was on his way out of the hospital when two emergency medical technicians pushing a stretcher raced past him, forcing him against the wall.

"Bad auto accident, Doc," one shouted on the way into the ED. "He's yours."

He raced behind them into the trauma room and helped lift Carl Price onto the operating table. He remembered the muscular teenager's quick wit and shy smile when he performed a sports physical on him in his office two days earlier. Now the lad was comatose with a bloodied bandage around his head and a splintered bone protruded from a jagged gash in his left thigh.

Bascom's mind momentarily morphed the youth's shattered frame into the crushed and bloodied body of his dying wife. His head swirled and his knees buckled, just as they did when the only woman he had ever truly loved died in his arms.

Donna's voice pulled him back from his incubus. "Dr. Bascom, are you OK?" she asked, gently shaking his arm.

"Er, yes. I'm fine," he mumbled, shaking the horror from his head. "Code blue," he yelled as he tore open the boy's shirt.

Ben was in the hallway when the alarm sounded over the loudspeakers. As he entered the ED, a young, muscular man wearing two surgical masks ran into him, almost knocking him off his feet.

"Out of my way, old man!" he ordered, pushing him aside. Ben watched the masked man disappear down the hallway, his white coat tails flapping behind him. He shrugged, then turned and limped to a back corner of the trauma room.

"Donna," he heard Bascom order as he pointed to a swollen area around a needle in the boy's arm, "pull that infiltrated IV and start another."

"Right," she said. She tore open a drawer on the crash cart and grabbed a cellophane covered box and a bag of clear liquid from its top drawer.

"Jane," he ordered another nurse as he straightened the boy's legs, "cut off these pants and cover that bone with saline soaked towels."

"OK," the black woman replied, pulling a pair of scissors from her pocket.

Bascom was undoing the bloodied dressing around Carl's head when Thompson lumbered into the room. "He needs an endotracheal tube, Joe. With this head injury he might not be breathing much longer."

As the giant surgeon prepared to intubate the sixteen-year-old, Bascom shined a flashlight onto his pupils. They narrowed in response to the light, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The boy's brain had not yet started swelling, but given the severity of the head injury, it was likely to start soon.

"Blood pressure is sixty over forty and I can't feel a pulse!" a panicked young nurse yelled.

"I'm in," Donna said as she attached a bag of saline solution to the catheter she had just inserted into a vein in Carl's forearm.

"Run it wide open, Donna," he ordered, "and start another. He's in shock and needs fluids!"

Linda Stevens, a pediatrician, had already sliced through the skin in the opposite arm with a scalpel and was probing the opening with a curved clamp.

"I've got a vein here," she said calmly. She inserted a plastic catheter into it, drew blood into its syringe, and handed it to the laboratory technician standing behind her.

"Four units of universal blood, Larry," she ordered, holding her thumb over the end of the catheter. "I need a bag of Ringer's, someone."

"Would you prefer Hetastarch?" Donna asked.

"What's that?"

"Hang it," Bascom ordered.

"Right." Donna ran to the cabinet, near where Ben was standing, to retrieve the solution. "If Bob can't save this boy, no one can," she whispered.

"He sure is cool under fire," he agreed.

Donna hung the Hetastarch as Bascom studied the spikes marching across the heart monitor. They were slowly flattening into a horizontal line. It was a sign that the boy's brain had started swelling, shutting down its control centers.

"Where do you want me, Bob?" Marty Nevins asked as he burst onto the scene in bloody OR scrubs.

"CPR, Marty, he's flat-lining. Donna, hang a hundred grams of Mannitol," he ordered. "And Joe, double the rate on the respirator. It might reverse the cerebral edema. Quickly! We're losing him!"

Nevins went to the boy's side and began pumping on his chest. "Adrenaline!" he ordered. A nurse handed him a syringe from the crash cart. He injected the stimulant directly into Carl’s heart, then renewed the chest compressions with greater intensity.

Ted Steele, a family doctor, arrived, looked to Bascom who pointed to Carl's fractured leg, and went to the foot of the table. He removed the blood-soaked towel, gasped at the jagged end of the shattered femur pointing at him, and replaced the towel.

Bascom reexamined Carl's eyes. His right pupil was now larger than his left and was no longer narrowing in response to the light, an ominous sign.

Airway, Bleeding, Circulation, he thought. He knew his team had addressed each of them correctly and efficiently, yet he could do nothing more as he watched the

boy’s heartbeats slowly but inexorably disappear on the monitor until they stopped completely.

Carl was dead.

Bascom turned off the instrument’s shrieking alarm, but continued to study the unwavering line in the middle of its screen for a few minutes until, with a choked voice, said simply, "That's enough. I'll handle it from here."

The death of any patient, especially one so young and vibrant, always weighed heavily on him. He never felt he had the power to decide who would live or die, but he was sure that if a patient died under his care, it was because of something he forgot to do, or worse, had done wrong.

He sighed deeply before asking Donna to make the boy presentable to visitors, and then left the emergency room with Ben and a few others following behind him.

Bascom trudged to the waiting room where Martha Price was wailing hysterically despite her husband's efforts to calm her.

"Martha," he said, "I'm so−−"

"Dr. Bascom!" Donna shouted from the trauma room.

"I'll be right back," he said, and raced to the nurse's side.

"Look!" she demanded, pointing to the peaked pattern that had replaced the straight line on the monitor. "He's alive!"

Bascom put his stethoscope to the boy's chest and heard a heartbeat. Incredibly Carl *was* alive!

He wrote orders on the boy's chart and then called the PUH from the nursing station to tell them he was transferring the boy by helicopter to their neurosurgical ward.

"Well, Donna," he said, returning to his patient, "miracles do happen."

"Your presence didn't hurt either." She smiled as she adjusted Carl's IV.

"Somebody's presence anyway," Bascom said before returning to the boy's parents to give them the good news. He warned them their son's recovery would be long and perilous, and that he could not predict whether or not he would return to his former self, but he was alive.

He brought them into the trauma room and left them with Carl before retreating with Donna to the charting room. As he was documenting the events, a young, muscular, masked male in a spotless white jacket poked his head in the door, mumbled, "excuse me," and disappeared again.

"Who was that?" Bascom asked.

"That piece of s..t is Dr. Evans, Davidson's prodigy from San Francisco," Donna replied, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Just coming on duty?" he asked, returning to his report.

"He's been here all morning."

"He wasn't at the code."

"Typical. Remember I told you one of our new doctors was ordering too many studies and is incompetent?"

"Sure."

"That's him. To protect himself from patients' germs, he wears a mask and stands three feet away from them. After he asks where it hurts, no matter what the answer, he orders all the tests he can think of. He carries a list of the laboratory tests we can run and checks it regularly to make sure he doesn’t forget any.

“What irks me is that a patient will tell me he didn't black out in an accident, but Evans will write on the chart that he did, then order a head CT. He orders three or four a day, when the unit is working, which makes a fortune for the hospital. Blood also nauseates him, so when he heard the EMTs bringing in Carl, he ran out the back door."

"Are you serious?" Bascom asked incredulously, drop-

ping his pen on the chart. His expression hardened as he awaited her reply.

"You bet," she said. "The guy's useless. He should have become a radiologist – they never touch patients! But he can't read X-rays worth a damn either. He wouldn't even make a good autopsy specimen. He's rotten inside."

Bascom whistled softly. An emergency physician who refused to touch a patient was incompetent under the best conditions. Under the worst, he would be criminally negligent. This time Evans was lucky because there were other doctors on duty, but he shuddered to think what would have happened if he had been alone when Carl arrived.

He had no idea if Davidson knew his new employee was this inept, although he suspected he did. He also suspected Davidson had hired him for his penchant to order medically unnecessary, but economically profitable, laboratory and radiological studies.

As the ED director with responsibility for what happened there, he needed to clarify the situation.

Bascom completed his charting and searched out Dr. Evans. He found the masked physician standing four feet away from his patient, a foot further than Donna had described, scribbling on a chart.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Bascom. I'd like to speak with you," he said politely.

"About what?" he grunted arrogantly through his mask. Taut muscles bulged under his white jacket as he bent the patient’s chart to his chest and turned to his inquisitor.

"In private."

"Here's fine," Evans replied cockily.

"Where were you during the code?"

"On Nature's Call. What's it to you?" he answered menacingly.

"Since I'm the director of this department, I need to know what goes on here."

"Simon told me to ignore you. You got a problem, talk to him," he said coldly, returning to his patient.

"Fine, but the next time you answer 'Nature's Call,' wipe when you're done. You're smelling up my ED," Bascom said before going to recheck Carl.

The boy's vital signs were stronger, but would his injured brain leave him crippled, blind, or worse? Hippocrates cautioned physicians in his *Aphorisms* to "never underestimate a minor head injury nor overestimate a severe one." Time would tell if the ancient Greek physician's belief would prove true in Carl's case.

Thirty minutes later medical technicians loaded the boy into their ambulance to take him to the airport for the helicopter flight to Phoenix. Bascom went to his office.

"Maybe your source exaggerated the facts, Bob," Joe Thompson said over the phone an hour later. He was crunching his food and his words at the same time. "I haven't heard anything bad about Evans. He sends me patients all the time."

"I never would have guessed," Bascom said sarcastically. "You always do well with our ED docs. Did you see him at the code?"

"No."

"He was on duty and should have been there. Besides, the person who told me about him knows he's incompetent."

"OK, calm down. I'll talk with him. Who's your mole?"

"None of your business. Just let me know what he says, OK?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," Bascom said as he hung up the phone. *I*

doubt you will, but if I hound your fat ass enough maybe one day you'll learn to act like a physician.

He bemoaned the fact that Whitney's patients now received not only bad care, but also costly and unnecessary laboratory studies. He rued having called in the government watchdogs since it had brought Simon Davidson and Albert Evans into Whitney. The hospital, according to an old Italian saying, *e' caduto dalla padella alla brace*— had fallen from the pan into the embers.

That evening, while Ben and Evelyn were dining at his home, Donna called to tell him the boy had come back to life while Dr. Bascom was talking to his parents.

"I thought you'd like to know," she offered.

"Well, miracles really do happen!" he exclaimed.

"They occur regularly when he's is around."

"Glad to hear it. But who is that guy with the muscles and masks?"

"That's Dr. Evans, the bum Davidson hired to run his ED. Dr. Bascom reamed him a new a.., I mean, he had a word with him when things calmed down. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but from the expression on his face, Evans wasn't happy."

"Donna, I thought it was bad when I fought the CT scanner, but this is worse. Thanks for the call, I think," he said before hanging up.

"More problems, dear?" Evelyn asked after he returned to the table.

"Many more problems," he agreed. "But I'm too old to fight that hospital. Bascom will have to take over for me, if Davidson doesn't fire him for interfering in his monkey business."

"Since Donna has already ruined your meal, I might as well tell you Cohen fired me today," Evelyn said, eyeing

Ben to see how he would react to the news. “I'm relieved since I don't have the strength to run up and down the halls chasing his fat sister-in-law. Why don't we close your office and get married? We agreed we would after my ex died, and he did yesterday."

"Wow! Sorry to hear about Jack," he yelled as he jumped from his chair to shower her with kisses. "That's fantastic! We'll get married right away! I want you here, out of that hellhole of a neighborhood you live in.” He paused, and after a moment asked, "But who will treat my patients? They're all old and need special care."

"Dr. Bascom," she suggested.

Ben thought for a moment. "You're right. It's time to enjoy life while we're young," he hugged her again and tears came to his eyes. "I love you. Gosh, I never thought this day would come.

"It's a great idea to send my patients to Bascom,” he added, “but let's not be hasty. Let’s discuss it again, after I propose formally."

Evelyn smiled her knowing smile.

Chapter 9

"This is a dangerous part of town," Donna warned as Bascom skirted an overturned trashcan in a narrow, garbage-strewn alley. It was early evening and the peaceful orange sky belied the wind that had just passed through the town, covering its decaying houses in fine, red sand.

"A gang mugged Fran's uncle, a doctor, right there during a fake emergency call," his nurse explained, pointing to the "MS 13" logo spray-painted on the cinder block wall. It was the signature of one of the world's most vicious gangs, and its feared tribal members ruled Whitney's back alleys.

"If I weren't friends with Maria, I would have told her to call an ambulance rather than risk our getting stabbed like he did," she said, steadying the sack of medical supplies on her lap as the car bounced over a speed bump.

"Her daughter and son-in-law died in a car accident last year, leaving their two boys for her to raise. Sad. I became friends with the family after that. These people are dirt-poor," she added, "which is why Pedro refused to go to the WCH. I told her I'd bring over the best doc in town."

"Good to know I'm better than Perkins and Evans," Bascom muttered.

"Cynical, doctor?"

"It's my best trait."

"I doubt it. Thanks for doing this, even though Pedro is not your patient."

Bascom shrugged. "I can't ignore a call for help from anyone. It's odd they attacked Fran's uncle though. The bad guys usually leave us alone since they know we take care of them after they stab or shoot each other in their street wars."

He parked in front of a rusty gate that was once part of a fence, now missing. They descended from the SUV, he carrying his medical bag and Donna toting her sack. They walked around the gate and up a dirt path through a weed-infested garden dotted with broken toys.

Paint of various colors and layers peeled off the aged house's planking, and a screen, covering the lone window to the right of the entrance, was split down the middle, as if it had been cut it with a knife.

As they approached the house, an elderly Mexican woman opened the door.

"Oh Donna," Maria cried, hugging her, "it's Pedro's heart again. Please hurry, doctor," she added, stepping aside to let him enter her modest home.

Bascom entered a small room that was dimly lit by a bare light bulb hanging from its ceiling. A spiral of sticky, brown paper covered with flies hung next to it. Two shy, half-naked children sitting on a shabby velvet covered couch looked away as he passed them to enter the bedroom where an emaciated old man lay on a lumpy mattress on the floor. He knelt next to him and lifted the tattered blanket off his frail body.

"How's your pain, Pedro?" he asked as felt his pulse. It was irregular and barely palpable, an ominous sign.

"Bad. It goes to my neck," he croaked. A smile broke the creases of his leathery cheeks, the result of years of hard labor in the fields under the brutal Arizona sun. But smiling could not mask the sadness in his sunken eyes.

Bascom took a cuff from his bag, wrapped it around

the man's thin arm, and pumped its bulb a few times. "One-ten over seventy," he said while deflating it. "Are you allergic to anything, Pedro?" The man shook his head.

"Donna," he ordered, "give him an aspirin to chew and swallow, start a saline drip, and give him four milligrams of morphine IV. Pedro," he said turning to the old man, "you need to be in the hospital."

"No," he protested, shaking his head, "they'll kill me, then steal my house from my family. They did it to my friend. But you'll help me? Please? I can pay."

"I'll help you. And you can pay me when you get my bill," Bascom said, gently squeezing the old man's hand.

Donna started the IV and injected the morphine into the tubing. The drug would quell the pain within minutes, but since most deaths occur during the first hours after a heart attack, Bascom made the only decision his conscience would allow. "I'll be right back," he said before going into the yard to call the Phoenix University Hospital on his cell-phone.

"Does he have insurance?" the ED physician queried.

"It's unlawful to ask that question, so I'll pretend you didn't. If you refuse to accept him," Bascom chided gently, "I and EMTALA will discuss your future and that of your hospital."

"I'm sure we can find a bed in our coronary care unit," the doctor replied quickly, "and we'll get him on Arizona Health Care."

"Good. We'll be there soon," Bascom said. He then dialed 911 and asked the operator to send an ambulance before reentering the house.

"OK," he explained to the concerned faces around the mattress, "Pedro's going to a hospital in Phoenix by ambulance."

"No money," the man protested weakly. His wife knelt

by his side and took his hand. She rubbed it gently as tears came to her eyes.

"Can't you help us here?" she pleaded. "We can't pay–_"

"Pedro will get free care."

"Really?" Maria asked doubtfully, brushing a tear from her cheek.

"Really," he replied. "I'll ride with him in the ambulance, and Donna will follow with you and the children in my car."

The woman shook her head, unconvinced by Bascom's promise. Her grandchildren hugged her legs, hiding their faces in the folds of her worn dress, and she rested her hands on their heads.

"We'll stay with relatives in Phoenix while Pedro is in the hospital," she said.

"Fine," Bascom nodded. "I'll drop you off there if you like."

The ambulance arrived and within minutes its technicians had lifted Pedro onto a stretcher and loaded it into their vehicle. Bascom sat on a stool next to him and watched Donna help Maria and the boys into his SUV before the driver slammed the doors shut.

They departed together, but the ambulance, with its blaring sirens and flashing lights, was soon far ahead. Bascom was talking to Jesus, a young emergency medical technician with a Pancho Villa mustache, when Pedro squeezed his arm and then went limp. Bascom glanced at his heart monitor. Bizarre shapes raced across its small screen.

Bascom pumped on Pedro's chest as Jesus charged his defibrillator.

"Ready?" he asked without looking up.

"Charged at two hundred," he replied, placing the paddles on Pedro's chest.

"Shock!" Bascom ordered and leaned back from the stretcher. The paddles popped and the monitor went blank, but the lethal arrhythmia was still there when it lit up again moments later.

"Shock again!" Jesus's recharged paddles popped a second time, but still the fatal arrhythmia persisted.

"Shock at three-sixty!" The emergency medical technician turned up a dial on his defibrillator and replaced the paddles on Pedro's chest.

"Clear!"

"Go!" Bascom ordered. The machine popped again, but still there was no change in the heart rhythm. Pedro's brain could not survive three minutes without oxygen and half of that had already passed.

"Should I give him amiodarone, Doc?"

"Intubate him first," Bascom ordered as he restarted the chest compressions. The waves on the monitor were now half as large as they were seconds earlier but still as disorderly and deadly.

"Right," the EMT said, taking a curved tube from a drawer behind him.

"Ready?"

"Yes." Bascom fixed Pedro's throat between his fingers, making it easy for Jesus to insert the tube into his windpipe.

"Done," the EMT said as he attached the tube to a respirator fixed to the ceiling of the ambulance. He flipped a switch on the wall and the machine began to rhythmically force air into the old man's lungs.

"Record time!" Bascom said as he glanced at the monitor. Pedro's heart waves were now almost flat. He shook his head. "Give an amp of adrenaline and shock again," he ordered.

Jesus took a syringe from a drawer, emptied it into the

IV tubing, and picked up the paddles. "Clear?" he asked, placing them on Pedro's chest.

"Clear," Bascom agreed. The paddles fired again, but still to no avail.

"Give the amiodarone now," he ordered.

The EMT emptied another syringe into the IV tubing and within seconds, larger waves appeared on the monitor.

"We're getting a response. Shock again."

The paddles popped and the screen darkened momentarily before lighting up. When it did, there were regular waves flowing across it.

"Wow! You sure earned your fee, Doc!" the EMT beamed.

"We couldn't buy a cup of coffee with it in this case," Bascom said as he felt the ambulance bounce off the curb in front of the hospital. "This must have been the fastest trip to Phoenix in the history of ambulance lore."

"We've done better," Jesus shrugged as his driver pulled open the rear doors. The men offloaded the stretcher and pushed it into the hospital.

As soon as Pedro arrived in the emergency room, his heart stopped again. Within seconds a team of specialists intervened, but, despite their efforts, they could not restart it.

The emergency doctor stared at the heart monitor for a few seconds, shook his head, and then walked over to Bascom. "I'm sorry," he said grimly.

"You did your best. His wife will want to see him when she arrives."

"She'll have all the time she needs," he promised before excusing himself to attend to another patient.

Bascom went outside and awaited his SUV. When it pulled up in front of him, he opened the passenger door, took Maria's hands in his and said, "I'm sorry, Maria. Pedro

died. Please accept my sympathies."

"Not my Pedro!" she sobbed uncontrollably, covering her face with her hands.

Donna hugged her friend. "My church will take care of you, Maria," she said through her own tears.

Bascom led the crying woman into the hospital, waited as she wailed good-bye to her lifelong companion, and then accompanied her back to the SUV. Donna was in the back-seat hugging the boys as he slipped into the driver's seat.

After leaving Maria and the children at her sister's home, he and Donna drove in silence until they turned off the highway into Whitney. Burned-out houses still lined the exit, a dismal memorial – or was it a warning? – to a farm workers' unsuccessful strike for better wages years earlier.

"What good is a hospital if people are afraid they'll be killed or bankrupted within its walls?" Bascom asked as he pulled up in front of his office. "They might as well be brothels, then people wouldn't feel bad about paying for the screwing they know they're going to get."

Donna laughed. "Are you being cynical again?"

"I told you it's my best trait," he replied tiredly. "Pedro is only the latest victim of medical hypocrisy in this country. Fifty million citizens have to live with their diseases, or die from them as Pedro did, because the system is broken. It’s a disgrace. I wish I had never become a doctor."

"I'm grateful you did," she said.

"Anyway, it's always a pleasure to work with you."

"Likewise," she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. She exited the SUV, climbed into her yellow Jeep and drove away.

Bascom rubbed his cheek with the back of his fingers as he watched her taillights disappear into the distance. He shrugged, shifted his SUV into gear and drove home.

Chapter 10

After passing the night lying on his couch and griping to his feet about Pedro's death, Bascom drank two cups of coffee and drove to the hospital. He knew the old farm worker probably would not have survived his heart attack even with the best treatment in the best hospital in the land, but he also knew that the fear and distrust he had of the hospital in Whitney had robbed him of any chance he might have had to survive it.

He had hoped Dr. Davidson would make WCH a decent place for Whitney's populace to get care, but based on Pedro's fears and the stack of bills from disgruntled patients Helen had left on his desk the day before, he realized the San Franciscan had intended to squeeze Whitnians between the spikes of his Iron Maiden until he had bled them of their last coin.

He parked his SUV in front of the hospital and, bills in hand, stormed up the cracked path into Dante’s Inferno. He followed the nauseating stench of oil of wintergreen to Marty Nevins's office. The surgeon was sitting behind his desk, dabbing the smelly liquid on a bald spot in his beard. Instead of his usual cardigan, sport shirt and slacks, he wore a pinstriped suit, white shirt and dark cravat tied in a huge knot that ended an inch below his open collar.

Nevins dropped the cotton ball in his ashtray as Bascom entered his office. "Hi ya, Pilgrim," he said, snarling a

poor imitation of John Wayne. "Can I buy ya a drink?"

"Oil of wintergreen will not regrow your ratty beard, so spare us the nauseating smell, Duke," Bascom replied, briefly pinching his nose. "This place stinks bad enough as it is. We need to talk about what's been going on here lately."

"I avoid politics, Bob," he said as he screwed the cap back on the bottle. "It's ordered in the Hippocratic Oath. 'The modern physician shall not stick his nose into hospital business, even if his patients' lives and fortunes are at stake, because it could lower his income.'"

"Sounds more like the Hypocritic Oath to me. Did you know the cost of some lab tests has increased over two hundred percent since Davidson took over?" Bascom asked, dropping the bills on the desk.

The surgeon quickly made the sign of the cross over them as if they were chartaceous vampires. "I don't wanna know 'cause I don't get no respect," he said, changing his accent.

"When you decide you'd like some, call me. A shot of testosterone would do wonders for you also. And what's with the new suit? Going to a funeral?" Bascom asked. He left without waiting for a reply.

Linda Stevens ran into him in the hallway, pardoned herself and then entered her office. He followed the red-haired pediatrician into her book-filled cubicle and leaned against a wall. She sat in a high-backed chair in the corner of the room, pulled her legs up under her, and gazed out the window.

"Got a problem I can help with, Linda?" Bascom asked.

"Yeah," she grunted. "Shoot Davidson for me."

He laughed. "Call James Bond. I'm not licensed to kill. What'd he do?"

"He closed down peds to open a drunk tank."

"That's absurd!"

"According to Cohen," she resumed, absentmindedly spinning a diamond ring on her left hand, "insured drunks pay, migrants' kids don't. He says the hospital isn't licensed for peds anyway."

"Were his pupils responding to light?" He understood why Davidson would want to eliminate unprofitable services, but to deny care to children for that reason was abominable, and in the case of a life-threatening emergency, highly illegal.

"I'm not in the mood for cute remarks, Bob," she replied, looking up at him. "If I can't admit my kids here, I'm transferring my office to Phoenix. My patients will follow me."

"A few of the wealthier families might," he said, running a hand through his long blond hair, "but no mother, especially a poor one, which most of them are in this town, would drive a hundred twenty miles round-trip just because her kid has a runny nose. She'll go to your replacement and forget your name in a week. We'll straighten this out, Linda. Just don't make any rash decisions, OK?"

She nodded and Bascom left her office, meeting Betty Perez, an overweight ED nurse, in the hallway.

"God, what a day," she said, blowing a strand of hair from her chubby face with a stream of air from crooked lips.

"What's your problem?" he asked.

"Dr. Davidson opened a walk-in clinic next to the ED, and we’re so busy, I haven't been able to sit for more than thirty seconds." She was a good nurse, but sitting was what she did best.

"A clinic?" Bascom echoed in disbelief.

"Yep. For patients that don't have their own doctors.

But everyone we treat gets a compulsory follow-up appointment there, whether they have their own doctors or not.

"Well, gotta go. Patients are piling up," she said before waddling off to the emergency room.

Wiggly lines, classic harbingers of a migraine headache, began encircling his field of vision as Ted Steele approached him. The chief-of-staff bounced on his heels and moved his head like a bobble-head doll. He, like Marty Nevins, was wearing a dark suit, white shirt, tie, and shiny wing-tipped shoes.

What is it with these suits? Are there alien pods in the attic?

"Got something for you, Bob," he sang out, waving a document in the air.

"A tithe on my earnings?" Bascom asked sarcastically.

"Nah, it's the proposal for the clinic Dr. Davidson just opened."

"Really? He opens the clinic and *then* proposes it?"

"Yeah," Ted said, shrugging his scrawny shoulders.

"Don't you think that is an ass-backwards conflict of interest?"

He scratched his head. "I don't know. Might be," he said, shrugging his shoulders again.

"Did you forget Hunter skimmed off all the insured patients and left us the charity cases?" he asked, irritated by the man's apathy, or more likely, his stupidity. His headache was coming on faster and was more severe than usual. He massaged his brow with the fingers of both hands, wishing he were back in his baita. He was now certain that his reason to stay in dusty Whitney was wrong. A battle wasn't better than a bottle.

"He sent me many insured patients."

"Lucky you," Bascom said curtly. He peeked through

his fingers at Steele, who was wagging his head side to side, seemingly unsure whether to stay or to leave in search for others who would be more appreciative of the news he was ordered to deliver.

"Davidson will not be sending you any new ones," Bascom warned, "and he'll be keeping your old ones. You think that's OK, even if will cost them double? Patients whom you well know can hardly afford to pay your present fees."

"Dr. Davidson promised he would return my patients to me for follow-up, and I believe him," Steele huffed before slithering down the hall.

Bascom watched in disgust as the messenger disappeared around a corner of what used to be Cohen's, now Davidson's, square doughnut. It reminded him of Nietzsche's words a century earlier: "A letter is an unannounced visit, and the postman is the intermediary of impolite surprises."

He went to the OR dressing room where Joe Thompson was changing into street clothes. "Sure, I know all about them. Simon says it's his hospital," the obese surgeon roared after Bascom had finished lamenting the recent changes at WCH, "and if we don't like them, we're free to leave. His clinic doesn't affect me since I don't have any patients to lose. Docs refer them to me for surgery, and I send them back after I've finished with them."

"Always the altruist, eh, Joe?" Bascom said. "Simple Simon, rotten pie man, although he's more devious than simple. Have you checked into his ED crew like I asked?"

The giant surgeon took a white shirt from his open locker. A photo of an old-time bodybuilder Charles Atlas was taped inside the door. "Not yet," he replied as he donned it, "but our radiologist says his business has tripled since Evans arrived in town. Almost every X-ray he orders

is normal."

"We need to talk," Bascom said, rubbing his temples. His migraine had eased a degree, but the nausea was lingering longer than usual. He needed to lie down until it passed.

"Come to dinner tomorrow night," he said as he turned and walked to the exit. "I'll make some tortelloni or tortellini and a nice secondo. Bring your wife."

Joe licked his lips. "What's the difference between them?"

"Tortellini are small and filled with meat. Tortelloni are large and filled with cheese."

"How about both?" Joe pleaded.

"How about tortellini and Spaghetti-Os, or tortelloni and Spaghetti-Os?" Bascom said as he pulled open the door.

He laughed. "I'll take the big ones. Give the Spaghetti-Os to Cohen."

"I eat at seven, so be on time," were his final words as he left the room and returned home to sleep off what remained of his migraine.

Bascom was determined not let the San Franciscan pillage the community as he saw fit, but he needed allies to stop him. Even though Joe had made it perfectly clear he would never do anything to imperil his income, he had still hoped to convince the fat surgeon to stand with him against the professional bandit.

Helen was jotting a name in the appointment book when he arrived back in his office later in the day. He rapped a ditty on the ledge of her Dutch door.

"Anything interesting?" he asked as he pried a splinter from the knuckle of his middle finger.

"Yes. Mrs. Gonzales called to tell us she is home and well."

"I need to sand down this shelf," he said, gently rub-

bing his hand over it. "What did they find wrong with her?"

"She doesn't know. Says her doctors didn't speak any of her languages."

"Which are?"

"English, Spanish, and Filipino."

"She needs to learn Medicalese," Bascom laughed. "Why does she speak Filipino?"

"Her first husband was Filipino," she replied, looking up from her desk. "Anyway we've nothing to do this afternoon. Fran has a stitch removal and a blood pressure check tomorrow. According to BBS, the Bascom Billing System, tomorrow, at least until the phone starts ringing off the hook, we earn nothing."

"The cost of the surgery includes stitch removal, but I might charge for the blood pressure check."

"You won't charge for that, you never do. But charging nine dollars and fifty cents to remove a skin tumor is pretty cheap, don't you think?" she chided.

"That's what the guy earns for two hour's work. Since the surgery took me just ten minutes, the price was fair. And if people have to pay forty dollars just to have their blood pressure checked, they'll stop coming in. Then I'll have to treat them for heart attacks and strokes. And that will cut into my golfing schedule," he laughed.

"Very funny," Helen replied, but she wasn't laughing.

Is Fran still here?" he asked.

"She's in back."

He went to the nursing station where his young nurse was replacing the plastic cover on her blood-testing machine. Her hair was mussed and she looked tired.

"What happened to my usually perfectly groomed nurse?" he asked.

"Last night was Tuesday," she smiled.

"It was Monday," Bascom corrected.

"If I say it was Tuesday, it was Tuesday," she insisted.

"So be it," he shrugged. "Have you figured out why our last test results were wrong, Fran?" He walked to the counter and turned off the water dripping into the sink.

"Outdated reagents," she replied simply. "You don't run enough tests to use them up before they expire."

"Maybe we can buy them in smaller quantities," he suggested.

"I'll check. By the way, Dr. Thompson called. He said to tell you his wife can't come, but he promised to eat her share so you won't feel offended."

"It's nice how he sacrifices himself for others. I'm truly impressed."

"He's much better at sacrificing others," she added with an arched eyebrow.

"Like whom?"

"Like Helen," she whispered. She looked into the hallway before closing the door. "Fat boy couldn't afford med school, so he convinced the hospital Board that if they'd pay for his education, he'd practice here. After he returned, he and Helen became inseparable until he dumped her for a millionaire farmer's daughter. Ironically the guy died broke and Joe never saw a dime of the money he hoped his wife would inherit and he could spend."

"So that's why he's stuck in this town," Bascom murmured.

"Um. I heard about the changes in the hospital," Fran said as she dropped the outdated reagents into the garbage bin. "What do you think about them?"

"Your father would wash out *my* mouth with soap if I told you," he laughed, remembering the comment she made on her first day at work. "I invited Thompson to dinner to convince him to help me reverse some of them."

"Please don't trust him, Doc, you'll regret it," she

warned.

"Sometimes people hide their good qualities, Fran. You just have to bring them to the surface."

"All his fat will make it a slippery job," she giggled. "Just don't believe anything he says!"

"I'll remember," Bascom promised. He left the nursing station and went to his desk to check the mail. After shredding the offer to buy a beautiful time-share bungalow in the Brazilian rain forest, he went home.

That evening he rolled a sheet of pasta on the butcher-block table in his kitchen. He cut it into squares as Cris had taught him, filled them with ricotta cheese, then folded them into triangles and wrapped their corners around his little finger to form *L'Ombelico di Venere* – Venus's Belly-button. Then, with military precision, he lined them up on a towel to dry. He prepared the *pomodori in forno* and *coto-lette alla bolognese*, covered them with aluminum foil, and put them in the refrigerator.

"Now I need a coup de grâce to end Joe's insensitive behavior," Bascom mumbled. He went into the bedroom, pulled his large, brown suitcase from the top of the armoire, and placed it on the bed. He ran a hand over the top of the worn vinyl case, pausing at the frayed piping in a bottom corner. It had been his faithful traveling companion from the day he boarded the ocean liner that many years ago had transported him from New York to Italy to study medicine in Bologna, the world's oldest university still in existence. He had refused all suggestions to replace it with a box with a long handle and wheels.

He snapped its scratched brass latches and opened it. A pack of yellowed love letters tied together with a faded red ribbon sat atop his eclectic collection of Stan Getz, John Coltrane, Bach, and Rachmaninoff CDs. He ran a finger

over Getz’s CD, and closed his eyes. He could hear him playing *Autumn Leaves* while he and Cris, snuggling in front of the fireplace in their baita, read snippets of their favorite books to each other. Beethoven's "Fűr Elise," the last CD in the pile, did not bring back pleasant memories. It was what he had been listening to in his office the night she died.

He grimaced and pushed the CDs aside. Next was a faded copy of a print by Renato Guttuso, an Italian expressionist painter, that Cris had bought from a street vendor outside the porticoed entrance to the *Archiginnasio,* the sixteenth century university building in Bologna's medieval hub. He thought of framing and hanging it in the bedroom, but he quickly dropped it back into the suitcase. There were already too many events in his daily life that sparked memories of Cristina, and he did not need another.

Rummaging through the suitcase, he came across a brown envelope containing two ticket stubs from *Rigoletto,* an opera they had seen at La Scala in Milan when he was a medical intern. They sat in the top balcony, so high up that Cris had lamented she needed binoculars just to see the floor of the opera house. They laughed about it in bed later that night before turning to more pleasurable matters. He stuck them back in the envelope and dropped it onto Guttuso's print.

Wrapped in towels in the corner of the suitcase, under old, leather bound copies of *The Aphorisms of Hippocrates* and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici,* were gifts a wealthy politician had given him for pulling his son out of a crevice along a ski trail a few miles from Lizzano in Belvedere. One was a small, black, glass bottle of Armando Manni's Tuscan olive oil, *Per me*. At three hundred fifty dollars a liter, it was the world's most expensive vegetable oil. Critics had compared its purity to a fine wine and

renowned chefs offered it to their most favored guests.

He placed it on the bed and picked up a bottle of Pedroni's balsamic vinegar. It came with a hand-blown glass dropper, since it needed only a few drops to dress a salad. They, along with a book and a signed lot number card, had arrived in a stout wooden box with a brass latch that sat on the mantelpiece in his baita. The company had produced only one hundred bottles of the fifty-year-old complex and viscous condiment named *Caesar,* in honor of its founder. Its cut glass container was smaller than Manni's, but ten times more costly.

Pedroni's book explained that nine hundred years ago, vintners in Modena gave balsamic vinegar as a mark of favor to those of importance. Although mistakenly considered wine vinegar, it is made from sweet white Trebbiano grape pressings boiled down to dark syrup and then placed into oaken kegs along with a vinegar "mother." Over decades it is decanted into ever-smaller kegs of ash, chestnut, juniper and other fine woods that progressively add character to it as the moisture evaporates, further thickening the vinegar and concentrating its flavor.

Bascom replaced his suitcase on top of the armoire and brought the expensive condiments into the kitchen. He put them on the table in the breakfast nook and then went to the garage to get a wide, wooden slab and cinder blocks. He dragged them into the kitchen and built a makeshift bench he hoped would be strong enough to support Whitney's fat surgeon.

While lying in bed later that evening, he took Cristina's picture from the nightstand and stood it on his chest.

Well, Cris, I hope tomorrow's meal will get to Thompson's heart and not just his stomach. The people of this dusty town face challenges you couldn't begin to imagine, and I need fat boy to help bring some relief into their lives.

He fell into a troubled sleep with his wife's picture still wrapped in his arms.

Chapter 11

The neurosurgeon from Phoenix called Bascom at home the next morning to tell him that Carl Price was still comatose but stable, and that his parents wanted him transferred back to Whitney because they were tiring of the long, daily, round trip to Phoenix. Bascom had reluctantly agreed to admit the boy to the custodial care unit of Davidson's hospital. He would need nursing care until he awoke, but he could not forget Nurse Ruiz. Her incompetence had caused Victor Forest's death, and he was afraid Carl might meet a similar end if a nurse like her cared for him.

As he rolled out of bed, Cris's picture frame cracked under him. "I'll fix your spirit tomorrow," he apologized to her image as he picked up the pieces and placed them on his nightstand. "I only wish I could have fixed your body a year ago."

As he showered, he thought of various ways he might persuade Joe Thompson to help him fight Davidson's onerous changes at WCH. He could erect a huge bronze statue in his honor on the hospital's front lawn, but he knew that no matter how big it was, it would never satisfy his outsized ego. Offering him free *tortellini* for life was another possibility, but too labor intensive. He finally had to admit that Joe’s real interests were rectangular and green and fit into his wallet. He would never give up even one of them just to save a farm worker from bad care or a lifetime of

debt.

The Shadwells were waiting for him when he arrived in his office that morning. Rose, a tiny woman with tired eyes and gray hair, was standing next to her husband, a wizened man lying on the examining table and coughing spasmodically. After catching his breath, he rasped, "I've got lung cancer, hip pain, bad headaches, and can't see anything on my left side."

"Bill threatened me with a knife, doctor," Rose added as she rested her child-sized hand on his chest, "and he accused me of adultery. I'm sixty-years-old and should be so lucky," she lamented. Her pale lips trembled. "He's always been gentle and loving. I don't understand why he's behaving so badly now." Tears were a word away, and Bascom covered her hand with his.

"Mrs. Shadwell," he explained gently, "Bill's symptoms and his anger are due to the spread of the cancer to his brain. If you wish, I can admit him to the hospital while we search for a solution to your problem."

The Shadwells agreed and Bascom admitted Bill to the chronic care ward that afternoon. Carl arrived by ambulance at almost the same time, and he admitted him to an adjoining room. The boy was comatose and his leg was in a cast. His recovery still could be months away.

Joe lumbered into Bascom's home at seven that evening and sniffed the air. "This is what I call 'aroma,'" he said before storming into the kitchen like a bull elephant chasing a female in heat.

He squeezed his bulk onto the makeshift bench, which, robust as it was, still sagged ominously under the huge surgeon's weight.

He stuffed an end of his napkin under his collar. "Bring it on!" he demanded, smacking his lips.

Bascom muttered a derogatory Italian phrase as he picked up the bottle of Lambrusco from the table. "Would you like a glass for your wine, or would you prefer I just knock the neck off this bottle so you can gulp it straight down?" Bascom asked bemusedly as he uncorked the bottle.

Oblivious to the insult, and pawing the table next to his plate, Joe replied, "I'll take a glass, but leave the bottle right here, next to all this food."

"Um, ah, damn this is good," he repeated as he gulped down every tortelloni, all the vegetables and meat, and an entire loaf of home baked peasant's bread in ten minutes.

As Joe was reaching for the salad bowl, Bascom went to the living room to answer his phone. When he returned, the bottle of Armando Manni's olive oil was lying empty on its side and the fat surgeon was pounding the heel of the bottle of Pedroni's *Caesar* to force the last drop of the rare, costly balsamic vinegar onto his salad.

"Couldn't you afford a bigger bottle of vinegar?" He raised it to his eye, peered into its narrow neck, and then rolled it over to its counterpart.

"Damn it, Joe," Bascom griped, "that's…." His voice trailed off and he shook his head in disgust. He was dismayed by Thompson's gobbling his food in true troglodyte style, but he should have known the buffoon could never have appreciated the rare and savory condiments.

He picked up the glass carcasses and the unused dropper, all now irrevocably linked to the most beautiful and the ugliest events in his life, and placed them in the cabinet over the sink. He would decide whether to keep them as mementos of heaven or of hell, but not today.

As Bascom closed the cabinet, Joe pushed his huge frame from the table, knocking the board off its cinder blocks. "That was good, but I'm still hungry," he griped.

"I'll stop at McDonald's for a few hamburgers on the way home."

He plodded into the living room and plopped heavily into Bascom's favorite chair. It moaned and creaked ominously as the surgeon's huge derrière forced apart its hand-carved arms. He rubbed a sausage-sized finger across his teeth and then looked at it. He moved it towards his mouth as if he were going to lick the green speck on its tip, but instead flicked it off with his thumb. He watched it sail through the air and land on the small table between himself and Bascom, who sat on the couch in front of him.

"I have news," he stated. His chair creaked again. "Davidson fired the housekeeping crew and replaced it with a couple of illegal immigrants at a fraction of the cost."

Bascom leaned back on the couch. "This has to stop, Joe," he said angrily. "With reasonable increases, Davidson could earn a fifteen percent return on his investment, but he's out to triple that in record time. Our poor barely survive in hovels or in abandoned railroad cars, busting their butts in a hundred degree heat for sub-minimum wage. If they go to his hospital, they're indebted for life."

"We ship them to Phoenix for hospitalization, remember?" Joe interrupted. "Davidson won't let us order tests on anyone who can't pay. He believes uninsured people don't need laboratory studies."

"Most insured people don’t need them either. But in the present situation, that's illegal and unethical," Bascom protested. He sensed from the moment they met that Davidson was a fraud, but he had had no idea how devious and dishonest the man could be.

"Sure, but the docs in Phoenix and Tucson know we have limited services here. Evans has a list of exotic diagnoses needing advanced care we can't provide, so they have to take his transfers. Cohen gets nasty letters since some of

the diseases are no longer known by the names Evans uses. When was the last time anyone had 'dropsy'? Where in hell did he even hear about that one? I don’t think it’s a word commonly used in comic books.

“Anyway no one can prove he's dumping patients. All they can say is that he's incompetent. Since my name isn't on the transfers and they don't affect my bank deposits, I don't care what they say about him."

"It's incredible how you condone these violations just so you won't lose a dime," Bascom rebutted.

"I don't condone them, Bob," he corrected, "I just don't get involved."

"That's worse when lives are at stake."

Bascom rested his hands on his stomach and, deep in thought, slowly spun his thumbs around each other. After a while, he asked, "It really doesn't bother you that the poor in this town are getting over tested by Evans and over-charged by Davidson?"

"According to *you* Evans orders unnecessary studies," the surgeon corrected. "Of course you're right, but you can’t prove it." He took a gold case from his inside jacket pocket and extracted a filter cigarette.

"Therapy is opinion, and you know there are dozens of opinions on how to treat any disease. If you accuse him publicly, Davidson will pay some incompetent or corrupt doc to testify that Evans needs all the tests he orders to do the great job he does. He'd probably swear he himself would order even more exams just to make Evans's excesses appear reasonable. Then Evans would sue your ass for libel and he would win. And Davidson then would sue you to defend the reputation of his hospital that you are slandering.

“I already warned you,” Joe said, tapping the cigarette on its gold case. “Pay attention! Davidson is tough. Don't

mess with him or his stooges!"

Thompson lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply, then coughed a few times. Bascom knew doctors who had justifiably accused colleagues of incompetence and were sued, and lost, as the fat man had warned. He was too naive to understand that a crook could successfully sue someone for calling him what he was. But this was America, and suing was as American as apple pie.

"Were you ever poor, Joe?" he asked, slurring his words as he often did at the onset of a migraine headache. *Will these ever quit?* he wondered.

"My parents were dirt-poor," he replied, blowing a smoke ring into the air. It shimmered, grew larger, thinner, and faded away.

"Did they have problems paying the rent or putting food on the table?"

"That also. Times were tough back then. We sometimes ate meat and potatoes for dinner – without the meat."

"How much worse would it have been if you had to skip even the potatoes because you had to pay a bill a corrupt administrator or an unethical doctor had deliberately padded?"

"I have no idea. We went to Ben Wiggins when I was a kid. He rarely charged us. Even gave us free meds," Thompson said lamely.

"Damn it, Joe, Stop making excuses! Simon Davidson and his steroid addicted puppet are *not* Ben Wiggins!" Bascom said angrily. He put his hands on the sides of his head and slowly massaged his temples. *Cris, Cris.… I can't….*

"A poor family in this town doesn't eat in a day what you just gobbled up in fifteen minutes," Bascom said quietly, trying to ignore the jagged lines that were fading from his vision. He knew he would be blind for a while, but when his vision was restored, the real headache would be-

gin. He needed to get rid of his now unwelcome guest.

“Joe, it's thanks to them you'll be farting in silk for the rest of your life, while they dress their kids in old burlap. And you have the guts to say you don't care? Don't you owe them something? Like making sure they're at least treated competently and billed correctly?"

Joe shrugged his indifference. He blew another smoke ring in the air and watched it float away. "You won't let WCH or its incompetent doctors rape your patients, but how can you stop them, Dr. Asperger?"

"Damn you Thompson!" Bascom shouted, pounding his fist on the coffee table, which he immediately regretted since it worsened his headache. "I don't have Asperger's!" He took a deep, sighing breath and mumbled, "When will you grow up?" He then stated in a slightly louder voice, "I don't know how to stop Davidson, but I know where to start."

"Where?"

"With Cohen. Call him and demand a meeting with his boss."

"Why?"

"To complain about the rip-offs and to learn if he has any other plans to screw this town."

"I'll try, but now I need to go since I have surgery in Phoenix early tomorrow. I won't call you 'Dr. Asperger' again," he promised. Joe's chair creaked and its arms again wobbled as he pushed on them to lift his bulk to his feet. Bascom wondered if a chair existed anywhere that would support the fat man without creaking.

"Thanks for the meal, Bob," Joe added as he waddled to the door. "Maybe we can do it again some time."

"Only if you earn it," he said as Thompson exited into the night.

Joe telephoned Bascom in his office the next day. "I just spoke with Cohen. He said Dr. Davidson wouldn't waste his time flying down for a meeting with us, so I told him we'll strike if he doesn't."

"Strike? Why the change of heart?"

"Perhaps it was the promise of more tortelloni. Are there any left?"

"You ate the leftovers."

"Too bad. Anyway I thought about what you said on my way to McDonald's last night. You're right, we can't let Davidson and Evans rip off our patients."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Me and Linda. She said she'd strike, even though her peds ward is now a drunk tank. I made it sound like the entire staff is ready to walk."

"That's great! I'm proud of you. When will our owner be down?"

"I don’t know yet, but Cohen said he’ll offer us a potluck dinner the night of the meeting."

"When you find out the date and time, ask the staff to arrive an hour early so we can discuss a plan."

"Will do," he replied.

As Bascom hung up his phone, he remembered Fran's warnings about the fat man: "Don't believe anything he says."

Chapter 12

A week later, while shopping in Whitney's only supermarket, Ben unscrewed the cap from a coffee creamer container he took from the dairy case and pulled off the white ring tab under it. He knelt on one knee and held it up to Evelyn with two hands.

"Ev," he pleaded as he pushed the plastic ring onto her finger, "will you marry me?"

The store manager, who was too far away to hear what Ben was saying, thought the old doctor was having a stroke.

"Someone call nine-one-one," he shouted in a panic. "Dr. Wiggins is down! Man down in dairy! Help!"

Before Ben could get to his feet, two stout Mexicans grabbed him by the arms. One lifted him while the other pushed him to the ground. He felt like a heretic being drawn in the middle ages, and feared he would next be quartered, or at least halved.

Evelyn, who did not speak Spanish, beat one of the men on the head with her purse, ordering the man to release him. They dropped Ben onto the floor, and one immediately began compressing his chest while the other pinched his nose and breathed into his mouth.

"No! *No*!" she shouted, now pounding on the back of the larger of the two with her fists. "He was proposing to me! Leave him alone!"

The manager, who was now standing over the trio and spoke perfect Spanish, finally understood Ben was not ill as he had mistakenly guessed, and ordered the men to step away from the fallen doctor. Ben sputtered and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I hate garlic," he griped, spitting the scent off his tongue.

"Are you all right, dear?" Evelyn asked, helping him to his feet.

"I was until a few minutes ago," he replied. "I never thought a marriage proposal could be so dangerous."

"But, Dr. Wiggins," the manager explained apologetically as two EMTs arrived with a stretcher and heart defibrillator, "you have to admit that an old man proposing marriage on his knees in front of my dairy case is not something I see every day."

Ben nodded and massaged the shoulder he banged when he hit the ground. "No harm done," he groused. He took Evelyn by the arm and they left the supermarket after paying for the coffee creamer.

"Well," he asked as they drove home in his old Buick, "will you marry me? This is an official proposal."

Evelyn giggled like a schoolgirl. "Of course I will, Ben. You sometimes do the oddest things!"

He entered the cul-de-sac and drove to the top of a long, tree-lined driveway that ended in front of the garages of his stately Santa Fe style home. Architecturally similar to a villa Ben had once admired in a travel magazine, each of its three asymmetrical cubes was offset from the taller one to its right, and painted a different hue of sand brown.

"I'll love sharing this place with you," he said as they entered its tall atrium. "It's too big and sterile for me. It needs the touch of a woman to give it warmth. You know, bring it to life," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"It'll be good to be here," she agreed as they walked hand-in-hand to the kitchen. She sat at the hand-painted table and Ben leaned against the wide counter that divided it from the living room. Four high backed chairs, similar in design to the table's, stood against the counter on its living room side.

"When should we get married?" she asked.

"How about October 10th in North Park? We can invite a few friends – maybe have a picnic or something. You know, a quiet gathering."

"It's a deal," she cooed. "Will you retire?"

"Sure. I'll send my patients to Dr. Bascom, as you suggested. He can do a better job than I can now. I keep forgetting medication dosages, and I have to consult a drug book every time I prescribe something. Sometimes, I even doubt my diagnoses."

"Oh shush, Ben," Evelyn said. "Your mind is fine, and you don't make mistakes. But transferring them to Dr. Bascom is a good idea. I know I would go to him if I had to."

Ben walked to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of skimmed milk. He was sure Evelyn's statement was nothing more that an innocent compliment paid to a very good physician, but recent events made him suspect there might be more meaning to it than she was letting on.

"Have you?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Have I what?"

"Gone to him?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, but the way you walk at times…." He poured milk into a mug and sipped it while eyeing her reaction to his observation.

"You're sure you're OK?"

"Ben, my love, I'm fine. You know how women get in menopause. Grouchy, irritable, tired, and who knows what

else."

"OK, I guess." Ben nodded agreement, but was not convinced she was telling the truth. He had been a doctor for too long to ignore his sixth sense when it involved diagnosing an obscure disease. It was insisting that something was wrong with the woman he loved. He did not know what it was, if it was serious, or even if he really wanted to know, but until he did, it would worry him.

"I do have a request," she said, "or rather a demand: get rid of those stained jackets and the taped eyeglasses. You look ridiculous in them."

"Hum, you're right. I won't need them once I'm retired. But Bascom is meeting with Davidson tomorrow night, and I don't want to miss the fireworks. I'll wear my costume one more time, and then I'll donate it to St. Vincent de Paul."

"I'm sure they'll love to have it," she laughed. "What's the meeting about?"

"I'm not sure. Bob called my office yesterday and left a message for me to be in the cafeteria at seven sharp."

"OK, you can wear that outfit once more, and then I'm burning it, unless you find a museum to take it. I won't let you donate it to a thrift shop. All I need is to see someone wearing one of those jackets around town. And get new glasses. You need something more dignified than your 'good' pair that went out of style before Ben Franklin invented bifocals."

"I'll do as you ask, but you won't get off easy," he said sinisterly. "I'll need to replace the costume, and I know with what."

"With what?"

"You'll see," he replied with a gleam in his eye.

Chapter 13

At seven-ten the next evening, Ben and Bascom stood at the food counter in the hospital cafeteria, suspiciously eyeing the buffet Cohen had prepared for those who would attend the eight o'clock meeting with Davidson.

Bascom caught a whiff of the smells emanating from under the sneeze guard and regretted not bringing along a food-taster.

"Do you get it yet, Bolton?" Ben asked as he tried to drop a gob of overcooked spaghetti onto his plate. It stuck tenaciously to the spoon, and he pried it loose with a fork.

"Get what, Ben?" Bascom asked, pouring a pale yellow oil on his wilted salad.

"Davidson's a bad character," the old man said as he slopped a red sauce onto his spaghetti, adding a few spots to his polka dot jacket at the same time. "Are you sure you want to take him on?"

"No, I don't, but I can't ignore what's happening here. Besides, Thompson promised he'd speak out against the changes. He also promised to have the staff arrive at seven so we could talk over the situation, but it doesn't look like he did."

Ben tilted his head. "I'm sure he didn't. You'd have better luck praying for a blizzard in the desert than relying on that man," he warned. "Don't trust him."

"Any suggestions then?" They picked up their trays

and walked to a table to the right of the makeshift podium.

"If Davidson beats you, which is likely since he's got most of us in his pocket, your colleagues will impiously divide your practice among themselves and destroy your reputation," Ben explained as they set their trays on the small table.

"If you can't face that, agree with everything he says, apologize profusely for wasting his time, and promise never to upset him again."

"Are you in his pocket too?" Bascom asked as they sat across from each other on rickety folding chairs.

"Maybe, maybe not," he replied mysteriously. "But if you have to ask, you don't know much about me."

They sat alone in the cafeteria, leaving their food untasted, and discussed some of the difficult cases Ben was going to transfer to his junior colleague.

At exactly eight o'clock, Simon Davidson led Cohen and his staff of pinstriped physicians into the cafeteria. He strode to the podium as his disciples, including one muscular specimen wearing a mask and a T-shirt with a Superman logo on the front, took their places at the tables. Each studiously avoided Bascom’s glare. Donna Franklin joined two nurses at a rear table.

Davidson tapped his gold ring on the metal podium. "I am here because Mr. Cohen tells me you intend to strike if I don't reverse my recent changes," he said angrily. "Well, the charges stay, and I'll fire anyone who strikes.

“*Understood*?"

Some nodded and others blanched as the fiery San Franciscan slowly scanned his audience. When he focused on Ben, the old man held him in a steely gaze until he cleared his throat and looked away.

"Who called this meeting?” he demanded in a low, menacing voice. “It couldn't have been Dr. Thompson, as

he would like me to believe."

"I did," Bascom said. “And you knew that already. But playing stupid becomes you.” Gasps and titters followed his remark, but the angry tapping of Davidson’s ring on the podium brought immediate silence.

It was then he realized his coworkers had come to the meeting, not because Joe had asked them to, but because Davidson had ordered them to. Old Ben was right. Their new owner had them in his pocket, and he had come to Whitney to draw a deeper, clearer line in the sand – the one he had already crossed.

"Who else but you?" Davidson sneered. "Did you drag me down here just to waste my time?"

"Nope. It’s because I miss your company," he replied mordantly. Another tap of the ring quickly stifled a laugh from a far table.

"But seriously, your price increases are causing our poor to go without care."

"I don't tell you how much to charge your patients, and you'll not tell me how much to charge mine, understood?" he responded coldly.

"Our farm workers can't afford your prices. Most earn minimum wage, if they're lucky, and have no insurance,” Bascom continued, unfazed by the rebuke. “Many even have difficulty feeding their kids."

"If my prices are too high, they can go elsewhere."

"They're too illiterate to know their alternatives," Bascom challenged.

"It's not my problem! Is there something in that phrase you don't understand?" Davidson asked, glancing at his gold watch. "I've a plane to catch. Are there any other questions before I leave?"

"Actually, I have one more," Bascom offered.

"Yes, doctor!" he sighed, while impatiently drumming

his fingers on the podium. "Be brief!"

"Your new clinic is a conflict of interest."

"Since it's for patients who don't have their own doctors, it stays," Davidson rebutted.

"That's blatantly untrue," Bascom replied heatedly. "Every patient who goes through your ED gets an appointment to your clinic. You're stealing our patients and overcharging them twice, once in your hospital, and then again in your clinic."

"Are you calling me a liar, doctor?" Davidson's voice trembled with rage.

"Sure. Didn't your mommy teach you that a person who tells lies is a liar?" he replied coolly. The audience gasped. Bascom was prodding an angry lion with the tip of an unloaded rifle, and he sensed his colleagues were waiting for Davidson to leap up and claw him to death. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ben cross his arms and smile.

"The clinic stays. Do you have anything else to say?"

"Sei un ignorante, puzzolente testa di cazzo."

"I don't speak Greek. What does that mean?"

You're an ignorant, smelly, dickhead. "We love you," Bascom replied sinisterly.

"Christ," Thompson uttered under his breath.

"Did I hear you say you're quitting, Dr. Thompson?" Davidson queried the fat man with a raised eyebrow.

"I didn't say a thing, boss. I mean, Dr. Davidson, sir," he replied sheepishly. He fingered his dimpled earlobe.

"Harrumph! Good night!" Davidson said before storming out of the room with Cohen following dutifully behind.

"I hope there's sand in their K-Y jelly tonight," Wiggins said with a swish of a limp wrist as the duo disappeared from view. Everyone laughed, and Bascom patted Ben on the shoulder. He finally realized that the old man, crazy or not, had become an ally. Maybe his only ally.

He exchanged a few words with him, then walked to the makeshift bar in the back of the room to get a drink.

Donna joined him moments later.

"Nice guy, eh?" she asked rhetorically as she ran a finger along the back of his hand. Bascom felt an electric shock run up his arm. Only Cris's touch had ever done that to him.

"I've met worse," he said, rubbing the spot as if it were a cigarette burn.

"I've got better Scotch at my place," she murmured.

"Let's go," he said softly.

They walked to their cars in the parking lot. He followed her yellow Jeep in his SUV to a quiet street in north Whitney. They parked in front of her gingerbread house with iron gratings protecting its doors and windows, and walked to the front door.

Donna keyed two locks, opened the grating and the door behind it, and flipped a wall switch. Crystal lamps, on old mahogany tables flanking a cream leather couch, bathed the small but comfortable parlor in a soft light.

"Have a seat," she said, pointing to the couch.

Donna crossed the room and turned on her Hi-Fi, a relic from the sixties. She stacked a few vinyl records on its spindle and pushed a hidden lever. A record fell onto the turntable, and in a few seconds John Coltrane's melodic rendition of "What's New?" filled the air.

"My father was a saxophonist," she explained, turning down the volume, "and Jazz was the only music I heard in our house while growing up. All I get on the radio here is Country and Western crap. Hate it. It runs through me like cod liver oil."

"I agree," Bascom laughed. He sat on the couch and picked up a photograph from the coffee table. It showed Donna riding a huge palomino horse.

"Coltrane is one of my favorites also," he said, "but some of his work is painful, like *Interstellar Space*. I've never been able to listen to it in its entirety."

"But his ballads are sooo erotic," she cooed. "He and Stan Getz are my favorites."

"Small world. Mine too. Do you ride much?" he asked, replacing the photograph on the table.

"As often as I can. Do you?"

"Only once. I fell off the beast and I vowed never to ride again."

"Too bad. Maybe if we ride together you'll have better luck."

"I doubt it."

"What can I get you to drink?" Donna asked, walking to the small dry bar in the corner of the room.

"You said you have Scotch. I drink it straight up."

"Not Ovaltine?" she laughed. It was throaty and sensuous, like Cristina's when she wanted special attention.

"Do I look that 'goody-two-shoes'?" he asked, drawing his eyebrows together in mock anger.

"You tell me," she chuckled. She filled two glasses with Scotch and handed him one before sitting next to him on the couch.

"Cheers," she said, holding up her glass.

"Cin cin," he repeated, clinking his glass to hers.

"So tell me, doctor. Did you come to the desert as penance for your sins?" She sipped her drink, then placed the glass on the table on her side of the couch and turned off the light.

"It was blinding me," she said with a lopsided grin.

"You must have eyes behind your head," he chided.

She laughed. "I need them to work at WCH."

"A bulletproof vest would be a good idea also. To answer your question, a friend of mine thought the change

would do me good, so I came," he replied sullenly. "At least I won't need to repent later on for my sins. This place is purgatory and hell combined." He put his glass on the coffee table.

"If you stayed under the radar, it might not be so bad. And you'll never make money if you keep treating your patients for free," she said, moving closer to him. She reached behind him, pressing her breast against his arm as she turned off the light on his side of the couch.

"That was blinding me too," she explained. "I have sensitive eyes. Besides, Coltrane sounds better in the dark, don't you think?"

The fragrance of her Shalimar perfume was inebriating. He rested his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes as she slowly ran her finger down the side of his neck. His skin tingled under her touch. Bascom had not felt so at peace in over a year.

Donna brushed his lips with hers then pulled him up from the couch and led him to the bedroom. Seconds later he had her pinned against the wall, his thigh pressed firmly between hers. He kissed her hard and she moaned softly.

He fumbled the buttons of her blouse, tearing loose the last. Donna purred as he lifted her bra and ran his tongue slowly, teasingly around her erect nipples.

Unzipping his pants, she whispered, "Wow," and led him to the bed by his erection. She pulled off her jeans and panties and lay back on the mattress. He quickly entered her, pumped furiously for a minute, and then said, "oh, Christ," before collapsing by her side. He lay with his head on her breast until his breathing slowed, and then murmured, "I'm sorry, Di. It's been a while. I'm not in shape to run marathons."

"How about a few sprints then?" she giggled, as she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Sure, just give me a minute," he replied, tracing her nipple with his finger. He felt it grow erect in the semi-darkness.

"Tell me about yourself," he said.

"There isn't much to tell," she replied. "I was born, raised, and schooled in New York City, and at twenty-six I married my high school sweetheart. Six months later he dropped dead from a cerebral aneurysm. That was ten years ago. Since then I've been working EDs and avoiding wolves who couldn't think past my boobs."

"Oops. Does that include me?" he asked, squeezing her breast.

"No. Even though you looked and smelled like a bum the night we met in the ED, you intrigued me. I wanted to know more about you. That hasn't been easy. I have to beat off everyone at WCH but you, and I was beginning to wonder if you were gay, trans, or some other version of the alphabet soup you read about in the press everyday," she laughed.

"Easy with the compliments, please," Bascom said. "They'll make my head swell."

"Which one?" she asked, rising to see his groin.

"All good things come to women with patience," he replied.

"Oh, all right," she pouted, falling back on the bed.

"As much as I'd rather not, I have to leave, Donna," he said. He rose from the bed and stepped into his pants. "I've something important to do tomorrow. Guess that sounds like, 'slam, bam, thank you ma'am,' but it ain't. I'll call you."

"So you want me to stop dating Davidson?" she asked, watching him button his shirt.

"What?" he shouted before he saw a smile creep across her lips. He laughed. "If you don't, we'll have a reenactment of Benito Mussolini's and Clara Petacci's final moments

right here in Whitney."

He kissed her on the lips and then he was gone.

Early the next morning Bascom invited Dave Olsen, the Hospital District Board's lawyer, to breakfast.

"Rough night," Dave said as he forked the yolks of his eggs at the local greasy spoon. "I gotta get married so I can cut down on my sex life." Olsen was a trim, tanned, good-looking, thirty-five-year-old tennis ace whose successful law practice had earned him a Porsche and a wardrobe of expensive clothes. The rumor around town was that few women, married or single, dark-skinned or light, could resist his advances.

"You're breaking my heart," Bascom replied, unimpressed by his plight. "We have serious problems at the hospital, Dave, and I need your help."

He explained the situation and the lawyer listened, brushing crumbs from his wide, droopy mustache after each bite of his toast.

"It doesn't sound good," Dave agreed after Bascom had finished his monologue. "Can you write a rebuttal to Davidson's clinic proposal?" He wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Sure."

"Get it to me tomorrow, and have your colleagues in my office Monday night at eight."

Bascom agreed, paid the bill, and they went their separate ways.

Joe Thompson, Ted Steele, Linda Stevens, and Abe Grimes, were talking among themselves when Bascom arrived late for the conclave in Olsen's office. Ben, working studiously on a crossword puzzle in a corner, waved him into a chair next to his as the lawyer began speaking.

"I haven't finished my investigation," Dave explained, shuffling a few papers on his desk, "but I've learned Davidson buys distressed hospitals for a song and then brings in his own docs, raises prices, and dumps unprofitable services, as he's doing here. He makes big bucks when he sells them, although there are lawsuits against him because he falsifies his profits, as much of the hospital's outstanding credits, primarily patient charges, are not collectible."

"I'll bet he's a pinstriped Martian and needs all the radiation his X-ray department can produce to keep his batteries charged," Wiggins giggled. After several similar absurd comments, Linda took him by the hand and ushered him from the room.

When she returned after a long delay, she explained that Evelyn was asleep in her car, and she could not wake her to open the door. The others laughed, but it puzzled Bascom, since this was the second time the nurse had fallen asleep under unusual circumstances.

"The Board controls the hospital's purse, which, contrary to a statement my predecessor once made, I believe is still being filled with tax dollars," Olsen explained after the laughter died down. "According to the terms of the sale, Davidson can tap into it any time he wants."

"They're taxing the citizens of this town to support a private hospital?" Bascom asked incredulously. "It's preposterous!"

Olsen shrugged. "The Board expects Davidson to use the tax money to provide free services to locals, but he's not doing it. There's a meeting next week in City Hall. He'll be there, and I'll convince the media to attend. The community might like to know what's going on here."

"I'll be there," Bascom answered as he rose from his chair.

Thompson mumbled a sarcastic comment he did not

understand, but since the fat man’s banter no longer interested him, he said goodnight to the group and went home.

Chapter 14

The next morning Bascom sat in his breakfast nook listening to his coffeepot perk erratically on the gas stove. In thirty-six hours he would publicly accuse Dr. Simon Davidson of unethical business practices and endangering patients' lives. He feared the consequences since he knew the hospital owner would not beat his breast and beg forgiveness from the town fathers. He was too proud and cocky for that. Instead he would promise changes he would never make to correct problems he allegedly never knew about, and then quietly plan his revenge. What that would be, Bascom could not know. What he did know was that he wished he were back in Lizzano, sipping wine and listening to Rachmaninoff in front of the fireplace in his comfortable baita.

As his thoughts drifted back to that small cabin on the hillside above the church, he could hear Lance singing *DQS, DQS, Don Quixote in Scrubs, la-la-la-la,* as he did when they had charged windmills together years earlier.

Bascom stood from the breakfast nook, turned off the stove, and then, without drinking his coffee, drove to the hospital. His two patients in the chronic care ward were less than Cohen had ordered him to admit, but as the hospital's patient population had grown from five to forty-five since Davidson's takeover, the administrator had stopped pestering him about his contractual agreements. Nothing

had changed to justify the nine-fold increase in admissions except the hospital's new owner's arrival in Whitney. He preferred not to know more.

He parked his SUV in the lot in front of the ED and entered the hospital. His nose twitched at the nauseating odor of Marty Nevins's oil of wintergreen as he passed through its main wing to the chronic care ward. Rose was caressing her husband's skeleton hand when he entered their room.

"How are you two today?" he asked. He need not have. The physical and psychological toll of Rose's long vigil by her dying husband's bedside had carved dark lines around her tired eyes and lips, making her look years older than she was.

"We're fine, doctor," she said, running a hand through her unkempt gray hair. "Bill and I have been reminiscing about a trip to Mexico we took years ago. I reminded him of a beautiful doll I bought, and he reminded me of the diarrhea he caught. Isn't it curious what we remember?"

"I've always found it so." They laughed, but Rose also knew the tragedy no one could prevent would soon overshadow those happy memories.

"Are you in pain, Bill?" Bascom asked as he rested his hand on the man's wasted shoulder. He could feel the irregularities in the bone as if there were only a sheet of plastic wrap between it and his fingers.

"Not yet, Doc," he answered weakly, twisting his head to the voice.

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," Rose complained bitterly, pointing to the overflowing wastebasket at the bedside. "The darn nurses don't come when I call them and the place is filthy."

Some things never change. "I'll check on that and get right back to you." Bascom gave her arm a fraternal squeeze. "You're a strong woman, Rose, but call me when

you feel overwhelmed. I don't want to have to admit you here for exhaustion."

"Oh, sure," she replied with a crooked grin. "I can see you admitting me to this dump for such a phony reason."

"Call day or night," he urged before leaving to visit Carl in the next room.

Martha Price, sitting in a chair with her feet up on the bed rail, was reading a newspaper to her comatose son when Bascom knocked on the door.

"The place is a damn pigpen!" she growled as he entered the room. "Look at that mess," she insisted, wagging her finger at the overflowing wastebasket by the door. "Plus, I ring for help but no one comes."

"Nice to see you, too, Martha," he said, eyeing the old, dented trash bin. "That's a common complaint around here, or so it seems. I'll be right back."

Bascom went to the nursing station where a young woman, wearing blue surgical scrubs with a large, monogrammed WCH over her breast, was shouting into her telephone.

"I need you *now*, Grimes!" she demanded, tapping her foot impatiently. She listened with knitted eyebrows for a few seconds, then yelled, "Are you deaf? Get off that golf course and get your ass in here *now*, or the next hole will be the one I put in your head!"

She slammed down the phone and rubbed her forehead before noticing Bascom standing nearby.

"Follow me," she ordered. They hurried down the hallway and into a room where an elderly woman was sitting up in bed, coughing blood into a handkerchief. An old man holding her shoulders moved aside to let Bascom place his stethoscope on her back.

"How much fluid have you given her?" he asked as he folded his unused instrument and put it back in his pocket.

He could hear air bubbling through her fluid-filled lungs without it.

"Seven liters of saline," the nurse replied. "I told Grimes it was too much, but he insisted. He wanted her rehydrated in a hurry since she'd been vomiting and had diarrhea for two days."

"She's drowning. Turn off the IV," he ordered. Bascom shifted the woman so her legs dangled over the side of the bed. "She’s in pulmonary edema and needs a pressure mask and cuffs on her arms and legs."

Before he had finished his order, the nurse had taken a mask from her cart, strapped it to the woman's face, and was pulling blood pressure cuffs from the cart's bottom drawer.

"Does she have any allergies?"

"No," she replied.

"Give her four milligrams of morphine and forty milligrams of Lasix by vein," he said. She dropped the cuffs on the bed and retrieved the medications in her cart as Bascom put his hand on the old man's shaking arm.

"Once the water's out of her lungs she'll be as good as new," he explained reassuringly.

"We've been married sixty years, Doc," he replied through twitching lips. "I couldn't live without her."

The nurse cracked the top off a vial and sucked its contents into a syringe. "Put in a catheter also," he ordered as she injected the medication into the intravenous line. "She'll be peeing up a storm soon."

Within thirty minutes the woman was breathing easily. Bascom reassured the husband that his wife was out of danger and that her physician would probably discharge her in the morning.

"Thanks. I’m glad you came along. I didn't know what to do," the nurse explained returning to her station.

“I was sure she was going to die, and that I would lose my license,” she said as she handed Bascom the woman's chart.

"You did fine. My patients tell me you never answer their calls and their rooms are a mess," he said, watching her reaction to his criticism.

Her lower lip trembled. "I know, and I'm truly sorry,” she explained after a moment. “Mr. Cohen laid off most of our aides and housekeepers as part of his New Vision Plan. He says I should be able to do everything, even clean the bathrooms. But I can't and I won't. I'm returning to my old job at PUH tomorrow. Patients are at serious risk here, and Davidson can't pay me enough to lose my license."

"Is it like this throughout the hospital?" he asked. He wrote a note on the chart and returned it to the file rack.

"Yeah. There’s a mass exodus in progress. Everyone hates it here," she nodded. "Making money has become more important than saving lives in this dump."

Three call lights flashed on the board in front of her, and she shut them off with a shrug. "I'll need to make rounds on everyone again," she frowned. "It upsets me when patients attack me as soon as I enter their rooms. They don't understand I'm alone and can't respond as quickly as they'd like."

"Our loss is Phoenix's gain. Good luck," Bascom sympathized. He returned to Carl's room where his mother was still reading the newspaper to her son.

"You'll have to put up with the inconveniences, Martha," he apologized as he approached the bed. "You've got a good nurse, but she's overwhelmed with work."

"Too bad." She put down the paper. "I've been speaking with other disgruntled patients in this whorehouse and we're forming a PADD coalition, Patients Against Davidson's Dirt."

"My, my, you sure don’t mince words,” Bascom laughed. “I’m sure the coalition will get Davidson’s attention," he added before turning to Carl. It had been months since the accident and he still depended on others for all his needs.

Bascom was listening to his chest when Jonas entered the room. His hair had turned gray and he had lost thirty pounds since his son's accident, but he remained steadfastly optimistic that Carl would play football again.

"How's my boy, Doc?" he asked. He walked to the head of the bed and gently brushed a lock of hair from his son's forehead.

"His lungs are clear and his heart is strong," Bascom replied. "He just needs to wake up. Have faith. Miracles do happen."

"Miracles?" Jonas asked.

"You'll have to ask Her," he said, pointing to the ceiling. "They're not in my job description."

Jonas laughed. "Maybe not, but can you get someone to clean this room? It's an outrage."

"I just explained the situation to Martha. You can air your gripes at the Board meeting tomorrow night if you want."

"I'll be there!" Jonas exclaimed. "You can bet on it."

"And I'll bring a bag of trash to throw at the board members," Martha added. "Bunch of useless bastards," she said. "All bought and paid for by that con artist Davidson."

"You shouldn’t keep your anger locked up inside you, Martha," Bascom warned playfully, "you’ll get an ulcer. Come to the show, but leave the garbage here."

During a lull in his office later that morning, Bascom telephoned Evelyn Cooper. Her falling asleep at odd times and her sometimes erratic gait concerned him. He feared

they might be early symptoms of a serious disease, and asked her to drop by his office when she had a free moment.

She was sitting on his examining table, fidgeting with the belt of her yellow paper gown, when he entered her room that afternoon. She forced a smile when she saw him.

He pulled the chair from under his desk and straddled it in front of the gray haired women.

"Thanks for coming, Ev," he said.

"I'm glad you called," she replied, twisting the end of the belt around her finger. "I wanted to talk to someone about my symptoms. I don't trust any of the other doctors in this town, and I didn't to tell Ben, since I don't want to worry him.

"I stumble and tire easily. I pretend it's due to menopause, but I know it isn't."

Bascom leaned back in his chair. "For how long?"

"A few months, I guess. It's hard to be sure since the changes are subtle, plus I have days when I feel strong and fit. I thought they were due to stress and would disappear after my retirement, but they haven't."

"I'm sorry about that, Ev," he apologized. "It was my fault. I wanted Davidson to give you more power, but he fired you instead."

"It was time to leave," she said matter-of-factly. "Ben has been embarrassingly generous since I retired, so everything has worked out for the best."

"I'm glad you're not upset with me."

"I'm not, and let's not mention it again. Do you think my symptoms are serious?"

"Let me examine you before I give you my opinion," he said, rising from his chair.

Evelyn studied Bascom as he examined her. She saw before her a meticulous but discreet, a demanding but gen-

tle, man whose hands transmitted warmth, courage, and optimism. She felt as safe and secure with him as she did with Ben when he treated the burns and broken bones her husband had inflicted on her years earlier. She was confident he would find the cause of her illness, if indeed she were ill, and would cure it.

After his examination he returned to his desk, pulling his chair behind him. "You seem to be in perfect health right now. I can't find a thing wrong with you," he said as he wrote his notes. "Maybe it was job stress."

"Then I won't worry," she said, relieved by the good news.

"Good. Just let me know if your symptoms return," he replied before adding, "Ev, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she replied.

"Why does Ben wear an old spotted jacket and taped eyeglasses?"

"It's a costume," she laughed. "They make him seem crazy, but he's far from it. Years ago his son hurt his back and became addicted to painkillers Dr. Grimes prescribed for him," she explained. "Ben asked him to stop, but the boy convinced his mother he needed them, and she got Abe to continue prescribing them."

She paused and looked Bascom sternly in the eye. "Don't you dare mention this to anyone, you hear?" she warned. "This is a sensitive issue with Ben. He doesn't share his personal life with outsiders, and he'd be upset if he found out I was telling you this."

"Ev, everything anyone tells me in this office is confidential," he replied, rubbing his chin. "And that includes what you just told me."

"Good. Anyway," she resumed more calmly, "one morning Ben found his son dead in bed. He was holding Grimes's bottle of pills in one hand and a bottle of whiskey

in the other. Both were empty. I heard he was so enraged he wanted to kill Abe. He didn't, of course, but he did divorce his wife. He hasn't spoken to either of them since. Or he tries not to.

"Ben's been fed up with our local doctors for a long time, but he's too old to fight them anymore. His spotted jacket and taped eyeglasses, his 'wackiness,' as he calls it, keep his failed colleagues at arm's length. He's crazy like a fox, and it's fun watching him. I never know what he'll come up with next.

"He cares deeply about those patients who still seek him out," she continued, tightening the belt on her gown. "Despite his colleagues' vicious attempts to force him out of business, he has a better practice than anyone could imagine, although it has dwindled over the past years."

"E' più unico che raro – he's more singular than rare," Bascom said, standing from his chair.

"That's Ben. But he's doting and would fret if he thought something was wrong with me. So please––"

Bascom held up a hand. "No need to mention it again. I promise you I won't talk to him without your permission. Call me if your symptoms return, Ev," Bascom said before leaving the room.

His feet up on his desk, Bascom was reading his mail a few hours later when Abe Grimes burst into his office and slammed a patient chart onto his desk.

"Goddamn thieving prick!" he snarled through yellow stained teeth. The angry old doctor's eyes were mere slits in his bloated, red face.

"That's friendly," Bascom said sarcastically. He dropped the letter he was reading and picked up the yellow folder.

"You stole that patient from me, *doctor*," the white-

haired physician said heatedly, pointing to the chart.

"I never 'stole' her," Bascom replied after reading the name and tossing the chart back on his desk. "I didn't know she had left your so-called care, which was a very smart decision on her part. I treated her since she was drowning, thanks to your misguided, or rather incompetent, treatment regimen.

“You do remember you refused to come in off the golf course to take care of her yourself."

"Bullshit," Grimes shouted, pounding on his desk. "If you steal another patient from me, I'll turn you in to the medical society's ethics committee."

"I'd get that flabby ass of yours into a pair of steel shorts first," Bascom challenged, quickly jumping to his feet.

"And if you perform one more hysterectomy on a fifteen-year-old,” he growled, wagging a finger in Grimes’s face, “I will cut off your balls. Then you won't need the steel shorts."

"Harrumph," Grimes grunted as he stormed out the door.

Fran rushed into the office. "What was that ruckus all about?" she asked, her brow furrowed with worry.

"Peterpause," Bascom laughed. "It further distorts the mind of the old and already feeble-minded. I'll be in at sunrise to prepare for the Board meeting tomorrow night," he added as he left his office.

"Remember what I told you about Thompson," she warned as he disappeared down the hallway.

Chapter 15

It was sweltering hot on the morning of the District Board meeting when Joe Thompson left his size fourteen triple-E shoe prints in the softened macadam of Whitney's potholed streets. Bascom had promised him free tortelloni for life if he would testify at the meeting that Evans was incompetent, and his mouth watered in anticipation.

Thompson already knew Evans was incompetent since he had misdiagnosed and over studied many of the patients he had sent to him from the emergency department. Until now he had not confronted the bodybuilder *eccellente* but physician *abissale* about his abuses, since the man had a bad temper. But the guarantee of a great Italian meal once a week for life overcame his fears. He was certain a brief, non-confrontational chat with the ED doctor about the weather, would serve for the sake of appearances.

The mastodonic surgeon was sweating heavily when he arrived in the ED, and he loosened his tie as he lumbered over to Evans. The young physician, whose white jacket stretched to contain his muscular physique, was mumbling something through two surgical masks to a patient three feet in front of him. Donna Franklin, alluring even in her dowdy nurse's scrubs, was measuring the man's blood pressure with a new automated machine.

For years Thompson had tried to date her, but she had ignored his offers until the day he cornered her in the drug

room and showed her two tickets to a Diamondbacks baseball game. When she coldly asked him where his wife's ticket was, he smiled sheepishly and walked away.

"Hi, Albert. How are you today?" Thompson asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his beefy hand.

"Note pad," he said through his blue and red masks. Donna shrugged and looked heavenward.

He lifted his masks from his face and let their elastics snap them onto his forehead. "You want to talk to me about the number of tests I order?" he asked. His words seemed friendly, but his tone was subtly harsh and threatening. Thompson trembled.

"Not me. No, no, not me. Bob Bascom thinks you're ordering too many studies," he replied nervously, "and he asked me to check. I refused at first, since I know you're doing a splendid job," he added, pandering to the man, "but he insisted. With all the cases you send me, I'd know if something was wrong. And I can assure you, there isn't. They're all correct diagnoses. You do fine work."

"I'm glad you agree, Joe," Evans responded coldly. "I order only what I need to do this job real good."

"I agree. But Bob– –"

"We'll be in my office, Donna," Evans interrupted, handing her the chart. He turned and led Thompson to a small room in the rear of the department without making apologies to the patient he had just abandoned.

"Bob feels being safe doesn't warrant all the studies you order," Thompson said after Evans had locked the door. He had just realized his mission could cost him untold sums of money if Evans stopped sending him patients. To avoid that catastrophe he needed to smooth his ruffled ego. *How do you placate a gorilla?*

"Did you know Dr. Davidson is bringing in another

surgeon?" Evans asked sinisterly. He pushed aside a pile of comic books and sat on the corner of his desk.

"That's ridiculous!" Thompson spluttered as he took his gold cigarette case from his pocket. "There's not enough work as it is."

"No smoking here, Thompson," Evans ordered.

"Sorry, Dr. Evans, you're right. I smoke too much anyway," the obese surgeon replied meekly. He quickly slipped the case back into his pocket.

"I know there isn't enough work for three surgeons. It would be plenty for one if *all* of us docs referred *all* our cases to him. But he has to be ready to take a bullet for Simon."

"I understand," Thompson responded meekly. He was sweating profusely, and his damp shirt stuck to his chest. He lifted a Superman comic book from the desk and fanned his face with it.

"I'll convince Bascom you're performing superbly and carefully, Dr. Evans," he groveled, "and that it only *seems* you order lots of tests because you're so thorough. We don't want lawsuits because you're not being thorough, do we now? Would that be enough, Dr. Evans?"

"Yes," the muscle-bound doctor agreed. "I know Simon will be very appreciative if I tell him he'll have the full support of Whitney's top surgeon at the meeting tonight."

"Tell Dr. Davidson not to worry. I won't let him down," Thompson promised, returning the comic book to the desk.

"Good. I'll tell him to hold off on that new surgeon for a couple of days," he replied. "Remember though, we'll be watching and listening."

Evans popped the masks back on his face and left the office, flexing an arm and palpating its taut bicep as he returned to his patient.

“The bastard has a way of making his point,” Thompson said to himself as he plodded back through the sweltering heat to his office. He was careful not to destroy his earlier footprints in the melting macadam.

Sorry, Bascom, but it's your ass or mine, and I have more to lose. Ha ha. Have a nice trip back to Italy, Dr. Asperger. You're a nuisance and don't belong here. I'll eat Spaghetti-Os.

"You look like you've been through a wringer, Dr. Thompson," his secretary commented as he passed her desk minutes later.

"It's hot out," he answered, fanning his face with his hands. "I don't wish to speak with Dr. Bascom today for any reason, Mrs. Farnsworth. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she replied nodding her head as her boss disappeared into his inner office.

Chapter 16

By three o'clock that afternoon, Bascom had called Thompson's office four times to learn the outcome of his meeting with Evans. Each time his secretary had used an implausible excuse as to why she could not pass him through to his colleague. He eventually was certain the reason Thompson refused to speak with him was far different from the ones offered by Mrs. Farnsworth. As he was hanging up after his last attempt, Helen staggered into his office.

"Someone insists on seeing you," the curly, gray-haired woman giggled before running from the room.

Seconds later Ben Wiggins, in a spotless sport shirt, pants and jacket, appeared in the doorway. He was puffing under the strain of carrying a large cardboard box.

"Hi, Bittle," Ben said. "Do you get it yet?" The old man, usually slow and deliberate in his movements because of his arthritic hip, bounced energetically across the room. His metamorphosis from a buffoon wearing a food spotted jacket and taped eyeglasses to a vibrant, stylish Romeo was astounding.

"Get what, Ben? Why do you always ask me that question?"

"Notice anything different about me?" he asked as he placed the box on the desk. Grinning from ear to ear, he puffed out his chest like a teenage football player trying to impress a cheerleader. Bascom presumed he was referring

to his new toupee. Apart from being too low on his brow, it was also two inches off center.

"New glasses?" Bascom asked, stifling a laugh.

"Well yes, those too. Ev was tired of looking at the taped lens," he replied. He adjusted the thin gold frames on his nose. "They make me look dignified, don't you think?"

"Absolutely."

"Too bad I can't see out of the damn things. Notice anything else?" he asked, pointing to his toupee.

"There are no spots on your clothes," Bascom replied, deliberately ignoring the hint.

"Also Evelyn's doing. But, no, no, darn it! Look!" he ordered, performing a perky pirouette and tapping his wig. Each time he did, a small white cloud of dust rose from it.

"It's the hairpiece. She has always said it would make me look years younger, so I swapped my stained jackets for it.

"She placed it on me herself, but I adjusted it after I left the house."

"Wow!" Bascom responded excitedly. Ben wagged his head this way and that to grant him a 360 degree view of what resembled a road-killed animal dusted with talcum powder.

"I've never seen a lovelier toupee! Its uniqueness defies definition."

"I'll bet," Ben laughed. "I'm retiring today and am sending you my patients, as I promised. But the exciting news is that Ev and I are getting married next week and I want you to be my best man," he beamed.

"I'd be honored, Ben," he said. *If this is what true love does to a man, Cris and I must just have been friends.*

"That's great!" Ben exclaimed. "No gifts, though. Just bring yourself and a guest, if you like. Now I want to show you the retirement gift Cohen sent Ev," he said, extracting

an old bowling trophy from his cardboard box. He carefully handed it to Bascom as if the tarnished brass object were of fine crystal and would break if not delicately and carefully transferred from one admirer to another.

The female figure was crouched on the base of the odd accolade with one bent knee ahead of the other. Her right hand was thrust backwards and the other extended forward, palm up, as if she were going to release a bowling ball. In place of the ball was a tiny thermometer, an extension of her middle finger that left little doubt about the offensive purpose of the gift. "To Evelyn: In Appreciation of All Your Years of Dedication to WCH," was inscribed on its scratched brass plaque.

"I'm sure the administration feels this way towards certain other members of the staff also," Bascom mused as he returned the grotesque prize to his friend. *It makes no difference what you do in this world. As long as you agree with those who run it, they'll praise you. Cross them and obscenities such as this will be the least of your punishment.*

Wiggins carefully replaced the statue in the carton and cross-locked its lid. "The wedding is at ten o'clock in North Park on the tenth day of the tenth month. Don't be late," he warned before picking up the box and leaving the room.

"He's something, isn't he?" Helen asked when she reentered the office, still giggling.

"One of a kind. Evelyn and Ben are the perfect odd couple."

"You won't find better people in this town. He was born here," she explained, leaning on the corner of his desk, "but Evelyn arrived forty years ago with her husband and infant son, Ronald. Ben treated her for a broken arm, and shortly after that for a black eye. When she appeared with a cigar burn on her chest, he knew for certain her husband

was abusing her. She denied it, of course, as many co-dependent women do, but eventually she confessed to him that her husband drank and beat her regularly. He offered to help her resolve the problem, but she believed his bad behavior was the result of her inadequacies and resisted his offers.

"She left him after he broke Ronald's nose. Since they was destitute, Ben bought them a small house and paid her way through nursing school. After she graduated with honors, he got her a job at the hospital. Even though he was divorced and they dated openly, she was only separated from her husband. He wouldn't live with her unless they got married. Odd behavior in today's world, but that's Ben.

"Her husband died recently, which everyone who knew him applauded even though it was unchristian to do so, and now they'll be married."

"Good for them," Bascom said, softly clapping his hands.

"I'm certain they'll be happy," Helen added before returning to her office.

Bascom called Thompson for the fifth time and his secretary again deflected his call. He hung up in quiet despair and went home.

He couldn't have turned against me. He has no reason to, he thought as he pulled into his driveway. The idealist in him wanted to believe there was a valid reason Thompson would not answer his calls, but the realist knew he had been betrayed.

That evening Ben, Donna, radiant and beautiful as ever, and Evelyn were sipping tea at the Wiggins's kitchen table.

"Well, Ben," Evelyn asked, "did he accept your offer to be best man?"

"He sure did. And he loved my wig."

Donna laughed. "Dr. Wiggins," she asked, "do you have a costume manager, or do you dream up these ideas yourself?"

"All my inventions," he answered proudly, patting himself on the chest. "Are you coming to the wedding?"

"I'd like to, but I'm flying to New York tomorrow to see my family. If I make it back in time, I will."

"Good," he replied. "I saw you leave the cafeteria with Dr. Bascom the other night. Did you two have a nice time?"

"Boy did we!"

"After sex, did you talk about anything interesting?"

"Ben!" Evelyn protested, shocked at his audacity. "That's none of your business!"

"Sorry," he said, unrepentantly. "But did you?"

"No. He said he had important business to attend to, but that was all. He's unhappy with Davidson, but who isn't?" She picked up her steaming cup, blew across it to cool it a degree, and then sipped her tea.

"Fighting that man will be lonely and dangerous. I don't know how long Bob will last," Ben said.

"Neither does he," Donna said. "Are you going to the town hall meeting tonight?"

"What meeting?" Ben asked. He doffed his wig and rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Damn thing itches like crazy."

"The District Board meeting. Dr. Bascom is going to lower the roof on Davidson. He's tired of the changes that have increased costs and decreased services in the hospital, and he hopes public exposure will bring them to a halt."

"Fireworks in October. I'll, or rather we'll," he corrected, looking over at Evelyn, "be there with bells on. Or at least a wig," he added with a laugh.

Chapter 17

Tonight's the night! Bascom thought as he drove to City Hall. He would confront Davidson at the District Hospital meeting, but he doubted he could convince him to lower his scandalous, but not illegal, hospital charges. Evans, however, was a different problem, and as much as he would have liked to, he decided not to mention him during the war of words he knew would ensue between him and his boss. The emergency room doctor was unquestionably incompetent, but Bascom knew public criticism, with or without documentation, risked a lawsuit. He was also certain that after numerous unreturned calls to his office, Thompson would never accuse Evans of anything.

So why attend this meeting? All I need do is to warn the town of the danger and expense awaiting them in Davidson's ED, and to admit my patients elsewhere. The result would be the same, but the stress would be far less.

But Bascom knew he had to attend that meeting, he just never asked himself why he persisted in protecting patients that neither understood nor, based upon past experience, appreciated his efforts on their behalf. In fact he was certain that the majority of them would align against him before his battle reached its conclusion.

He pulled to the curb a block from City Hall, shifted his SUV into park, and rested his forehead on his steering wheel. *Cris would make me turn around and go home*. *She*

knew when to fight and when to walk away, and she would not fight this battle.

But Cris was not there, and, unless his instincts about fat Thompson were wrong, he knew he would challenge Davidson alone. The working poor in Whitney faced hunger and privations his rival could never understand, and while he fervently hoped he was wrong, he believed he was the only one on the hospital staff who cared enough to defend them.

He shifted the SUV back into gear and drove to the City Hall parking lot with Lance's taunting laugh in his ear: *DQS, DQS, Don Quixote in Scrubs, la-la-la-la.*

The three-story glass and steel building was an expensive monstrosity that a few commissioners thought would revitalize the town's derelict Main Street. History had proved them wrong. The narrow thoroughfare, a minefield of potholes lined by a few decrepit one-hundred-year-old stores and shops, had been almost entirely abandoned as Whitnians preferred to shop in a mall twenty miles down the highway. Across from it was a garbage-strewn park a wealthy Mexican family had dedicated to the town's children years ago. Its rusting merry-go-round and a swing seat hanging by a chain, suggested none had played there in ages.

Bascom parked behind the building, entered its back door, and made his way to its faux Greek amphitheater. A glass-topped table with a microphone in front of each of the eight oak chairs nestled under it and an ornate podium of carved cherry wood occupied the center of its elevated stage. Plastic Doric columns lined its beige walls, and banks of plush, velvet covered seats climbed the conch to the ceiling in the rear of the room.

Jonas and Martha Price sat in the third row. Behind them, a lad with a bright orange mohawk haircut and two

gold hoop earrings piercing his right earlobe, sat with his hands folded on his knees. Next to him were three other young people, each holding a notebook or a tape recorder on his lap.

Donna, a female companion, and many of the townspeople sat a few rows behind them. Unbeknownst to Bascom, Ben and Evelyn huddled together under a burned out light in the top row.

"Why are we sitting up here in the dark, and not in one of the front row seats?" Evelyn asked, tugging on Ben’s sleeve.

"This is Bascom's show, and he doesn't need distractions," he replied. "People would clamor for my opinion about everything he says. It would make his battle harder. Besides, even I can hear a pin drop from here. The acoustics were all they got right in this multimillion-dollar abortion."

"Will you behave tonight, dear, or will you solve all the world's problems before we go to bed? Again," she asked sarcastically.

"Sorry, Ev" he said, patting her hand. "I'll behave."

Bascom nodded to Donna before going to the building's entrance to await Joe Thompson.

As he stood on the stoop that October evening, dozens of mostly friendly people filed past him, including his secretary and Rose Shadwell. The latter pinched his cheek, and ordered, "Give 'em hell, Doc. They deserve it," before other denizens swept her into the building.

At six fifty a black limousine pulled up to the curb. Simon Davidson and George Cohen exited the vehicle, trotted up the steps like a general with his briefcase-carrying aide in tow, and paused in front of Bascom. Davidson

sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose, and entered the building. Cohen paused in front of the rebel, smiled nervously, shrugged his shoulders, and hastened to catch up to his boss.

Moments later Thompson huffed up the stairs, mumbled, "Don't go in there. Davidson's out to castrate you," and quickly entered the hall.

If Thompson knows Davidson's plans, then he has to be part of them, Bascom thought as he followed the fat surgeon into the auditorium and sat next to him in the front row. Thompson immediately moved two seats to his right, symbolically disassociating himself from his colleague. He tugged his deformed earlobe.

"Son of a bitch, Ev! Thompson is pulling his earlobe," Ben exclaimed softly. "He'll knife Bascom in the back as sure as we're sitting here."

"You could be wrong, Ben," Evelyn replied.

"Not when it comes to fat boy. I've known him all my life. He's the most useless creature God ever created, after Abe Grimes."

Davidson, seated at the table with Cohen and four members of the Board, smiled sinisterly at Thompson's snub of Bascom. Dave Olsen, cleanly shaven except for his Wyatt Earp mustache, rapped his gavel on its sound block. “The meeting is called to order,” he said severely, "but before we discuss other business, we need to discuss some serious problems in the hospital that have recently come to my attention.

“Dr. Bascom,” he asked, pointing to him, “would you please present your concerns?"

"Thank you, Mr. Olsen," he replied, standing from his seat. Davidson, like an executioner waiting for the con-

demned man to say his last words, impatiently tapped a finger on the table.

"First," Bascom said in a voice he hoped would mask his terror of public speaking, "the new alcohol rehabilitation program has eliminated our pediatric unit. Rehabilitation is not an emergency, but a child's illness can be. Rushing him to Phoenix for care because he can't get it here will eventually have fatal results. And it's also highly illegal for the hospital to refuse to treat him."

Cohen raised his hand but Olsen shook his head. "Not now, George. Please continue, doctor," he ordered.

"Next the two hundred percent increase in hospital charges adds to the misery of our farm workers who have trouble feeding their families. These people may seem unimportant to some," Bascom said, glowering at Davidson, "but they comprise eighty percent of the working population in this town. They give us fair service, and we should give them fairly priced, competent medical care in return.

"Bravo!" Ben whispered to Evelyn. "He'll never convince the Board he's right, but we're talking principle here. Something those weasels could never understand."

"Then there is the reduced nursing staff, which has resulted in inadequate patient care, and the firing and rehiring of the cleaning staff under a different name with fewer workers at lower pay, resulting in an unclean hospital."

Olsen twirled the end of his Wyatt Earp mustache, and Bascom wondered if his other hand held a Buntline Special under the table, the lawman's legendary, if not journalistically fabricated, Colt Peacemaker revolver with its extra long barrel.

"Last," he said, "the new clinic, and its compulsory re-

ferral policy, is in conflict with the private practitioners in town. It is also incredibly expensive for our poorer patients, since Dr. Davidson over charges them twice, first in his ED, and then in his clinic.

"That's all for the moment. Thank you," he said as he resumed his seat.

"Now, Mr. Cohen, your comments," Olsen said, inviting him to the podium.

"I have something to say first," Davidson interrupted, jumping from his chair. He buttoned his silk jacket and stormed the podium like a Marine attacking an enemy foxhole.

"I object strenuously to what is happening here tonight. This is *not* the place to air hospital linen," he protested, pounding his fist on the podium. His cheeks were livid and his voice trembled with rage.

"The alcohol rehab program is *not* jeopardizing pediatric care, and I feel this, this, doctor's assessment of it," he said with undisguised disdain, wagging a finger at his accuser, "is nothing more than a cynical attempt to downgrade an important new service. Mr. Cohen has received many inquiries from Whitnians who demand it, but I can't tell you who they are since their names are confidential."

"Pure bs," Ben said in a loud voice.

"Shh," Evelyn cautioned. "They'll hear you."

"Let them. This meeting is only a bad stage play directed by Davidson with Thompson as his star actor. You'll see."

Olsen twirled the end of his mustache and smiled at Bascom as if to say, "you found the right button. He'll hang himself."

"We have changed laboratories," Davidson sputtered.

"It was a unanimous decision by our doctors. However, I cannot control its charges. Now George," he said gruffly, "continue." He spun and returned to his seat as his administrator walked slowly to the podium. His lips were tight and his head shook slightly, as if he would prefer the guillotine rather than have to debate the rebel doctor.

Bascom was unsure if Davidson had stuttered his last word, but his snarl and tone revealed his inner rage. As for the "unanimous decision," he was unaware of the change of laboratories, and suspected that "blood money," he smiled at the pun, was the real reason for the switch.

"Dr. Bascom's right about the housekeepers," Cohen explained sheepishly, interrupting Bascom's thoughts, "but we're good, honest people. When we learned the new company was paying its employees less, we voluntarily gave it more money, despite its objections, to bring wages back up to previous levels."

Shrieks of laughter erupted in the back of the auditorium after Cohen's obviously senseless statement, and it took several loud raps of Olsen's gavel to stifle them.

"As for peds," the administrator proceeded seemingly unperturbed by the outburst, "it's true we've opened a rehabilitation unit in its place, but the hospital isn't licensed for pediatrics. Even so, we're still accepting children."

"Your ED doc refused to admit one of mine yesterday," Bascom interrupted. Davidson compressed his lips into an angry line and impatiently drummed his fingers on the oak table.

"Excuse me?" Cohen asked uncertainly, tapping his fist against his chin.

"I said that Dr. Evans refused to treat a critically ill child in your ED yesterday, George," Bascom repeated loudly. "I had to intubate the boy in the ambulance on the way to Phoenix. That will result in another visit from the

boys that enforce EMTALA, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act. I'm sure you remember them. They fined you a couple of hundred thousand dollars for letting a patient of mine bleed to death in your hospital because he was Mexican.”

Davidson jumped from his chair and walked quickly to the podium. Cohen drifted sheepishly back to his seat.

"This attack comes at a very poor time. Whitney's hospital has just emerged from a dramatic financial crisis," Davidson lamented. "The clinic is an internal issue, having n-nothing to do with the quality of care."

"But it may be a conflict of interest, might it not, Dr. Davidson?" Olsen asked.

"Dr. Bascom," he asked, returning to the physician, "do you have anything to add?"

"I’d just like to say that the quality of Dr. Davidson's responses to the issues is the same as the quality of care he offers at WCH." There was another shriek of laughter and applause from the audience. Olsen let it run its course as Davidson fumed.

"Would anybody else like to comment?" he asked after the ruckus had died down.

"I would," a man yelled from the rear of the room. "How about the chapel our society furnished, and which you dismantled along with the pediatric ward, Mr. Davidson?"

A drunken voice chimed in, "Yeah, Davidson, you queer bastard, what about the fucking chapel?"

Olsen furiously pounded his gavel on its block. "Gentlemen, please. I will not allow abusive language at this meeting. Any further such outbursts and I will clear the room."

Cohen stood from his chair and raised his arms in a selfless attempt to draw the fiery attention from Davidson

to himself. "I'm planning a new area for the chapel," he said over the din of the protesters, "and when it's installed in its new location, people will use it more than they did before."

Cohen's odd reply again resulted in bedlam, and Olsen's gavel again thumped vainly to restore order.

"I would like to say something," Rose Shadwell said, standing from her seat. The crowd quieted as the woman straightened her skirt. "I'm a retired nurse, and my husband is a cancer patient at WCH. Despite what Mr. Cohen and Dr. Davidson have said here tonight, I can assure you the rooms are filthy, the care is the worst I've seen anywhere, and I hope you never have to send family members to that place unless you care for them yourself or you put them there to collect their life insurance." Her comments brought renewed laughter, which this time quieted quickly with a rap from Olsen's gavel.

"If you care about our community," she added, wagging an accusing finger at the Board, "you'll straighten out that hospital or shut it down."

"Missus...?"

"Shadwell. Rose Shadwell."

"Mrs. Shadwell," Olsen inquired gently, "why did you come here tonight instead of complaining to the hospital administration?"

"I *have* complained, repeatedly," she replied, "but they ignore me. Where else should I go? You're my last resort. If you can't help me, I'm transferring my husband to another hospital."

"I agree," Jonas Price said, rising from his seat. "The place *is* a pigsty. My wife cleans my son's room and she's getting tired of it. And the nurses don't answer our calls either."

"If Davidson doesn't clean up his hospital," Martha threatened from her seat, "I'm going to have Dr. Bascom

transfer my son to Phoenix. I won't spend my money in a dump with poor services." A long applause followed. Jonas kissed his wife on the head and sat down.

"I agree there's a long way to go," Davidson pleaded from the podium. His features had softened and the hostility was gone from his voice, but he was staring intensely at Thompson. Bascom squirmed as he suspected Davidson was quietly ordering Thompson to follow his rules or to be replaced by someone more amenable to his authority.

"I know some of you might find it hard to believe" he agreed, "but WCH is a far better hospital now than it ever was. We have, I have… er, I'm sensitive to what I've heard here tonight. I've suffered the same frustrations with friends in the finest hospitals in the country, but that is no excuse. I assure you I will review the hospital's problems, but not in public or under hostile conditions."

"Dr. Davidson?" Helen asked from her seat in the middle of the auditorium.

"Yes," he replied, flicking a hand as if shooing a fly that was buzzing around his head.

"If you find these people's complaints are valid, will you correct the problems?"

"No," he replied sternly.

A heavy silence fell across the room. Bascom was beginning to feel victorious when his opponent addressed his obese colleague.

"Dr. Thompson," Davidson asked sinisterly, "would you care to comment on Dr. Bascom's allegations?"

The surgeon tugged his deformed earlobe. "I disagree with everything he said, and the nurses are OK," he mumbled.

"Damn!" Ben exclaimed, jumping from his chair. "I knew it, I knew it, and I knew it! I warned Bascom not to

trust him! Someone should shoot that fat bastard!"

"Ben, please!" Evelyn begged, pulling on his jacket. "Shh! Sit down! They'll hear you."

"Darn it, Ev," he said. "This is an outrage! This damn profession is nothing but a hoax, a sordid game played at the expense of innocent people."

"Ben, darling," she pleaded, "you're retired, remember? You've fought your battles, now it's Bascom's turn."

"The guy is hopelessly outnumbered," he protested. "They're all liars, thieves, and cowards. How many other doctors are here tonight to support him? None! If I knew about this meeting, so did they. If they cared about the people of this town instead of their bank accounts, they would have been here to back the only guy with the bal..., I mean with the guts, to stand up for what's right!

"But down there is only Bascom, his accuser, and his executioner," he fumed as he resumed his seat.

"Joe," Bascom blurted in disbelief, "you mean to say that the unlicensed nurse whose incompetence resulted in the death of my patient in the ED is OK?" A hush fell over the room as the amorphous surgeon put a beefy hand to the side of his face as if it were a horse blinder.

"That's it, Joe? The incompetent, unlicensed nurses are OK?"

The executioner had released the trapdoor, dropping Bascom into a void where in a moment the tug of the rope around his neck would abruptly halt his free fall.

Lance had often referred to him as "Don Quixote in Scrubs," because of his rebellious nature. But the windmill slaying Don of Spanish literature had a loyal ally. Not only was this modern day Sancho Panza bolting in the heat of battle, he was taking the Don's sword and his horse Rosinante with him.

Olsen rapped his gavel. "The purpose of this meeting was to consolidate agreements between the hospital and the District Board," he said. "But before we do, I urge the Board, as its legal adviser, to study these matters. I believe they could risk our position with state and federal governments."

The members agreed, and without seconding the motion or taking a vote, adjourned the meeting. Davidson exited the room in a huff with Cohen tailing him. Bascom rose and turned to Helen who was walking down the aisle.

"Nice try, Bob," she said, resting a consoling hand on his arm. "He *is* a seedy fat bastard." She was too gracious to add, "I told you so, Lummox."

"G'night, Helen. I'll see you in the morning," he said before leaving the meeting.

Donna was leaning against his SUV when he arrived in the parking lot.

"Looking for some fun, stranger?" she asked with a wink.

"I've already been screwed tonight. So no, but thanks," he laughed. “I’ll take a rain check.”

"You did great in there, Robby. No one else in this town would have stood up to Davidson."

"I shouldn't have either. I'm a slow learner."

"No, just idealistic. Are you sure you don't want company? You shouldn't be alone tonight."

"No thanks, Di. I'll be fine."

"OK. Call if you need me."

"I will," he said before kissing her. They hugged and then Bascom climbed into his SUV and drove home.

He entered his house, slamming the door hard enough to bounce a few pictures on its walls. He went to the kitchen, tossed his keys onto the butcher-block table, and poured himself a tall Scotch from the emergency bottle he

kept in the cabinet over the sink. He gulped it down, refilled the glass to the brim, and went to the living room. He lay down on the couch, drained his glass a second time, and closed his eyes.

"Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you," was a ditty he remembered from his childhood. But Thompson's names *had* hurt him, much more than sticks and stones ever could. He rued the fact he had not trusted his instincts and avoided the meeting. Or better yet, had returned to Italy when he had had the chance.

Eventually the alcohol clouded his mind and he fell into a fitful sleep mumbling Helen's words: "Seedy bastard."

A few days later Helen stuck her head out of her cubicle and yelled into the hallway, "Newspapers!" He picked them up from her desk on the way to his office.

"Hospital Accused of not Serving Patients," the Whitney *Times* shouted across its title page. The headline in the Phoenix *Globe* stated, "Hospital's Self-Serving Secrets Exposed."

He was engrossed in the articles when Helen told him the Board's attorney was on the telephone.

"Yes, Dave," he said, feeling better than he had in a while.

"Bob, I'm sending over a copy of the letter Davidson is sending to the *Times*. It's a corker."

"I can't wait to read it."

"I'm sure," he replied ironically before hanging up.

A short while later Olsen's pretty young secretary stood in front of Bascom’s desk, offering the missive from a hand with rings on every digit.

"Present from Dave," she said cheerfully.

"Thanks," he replied. He eagerly tore open the envelope as she left the office.

Dear Mr. Olsen: (the letter began)

> The *Times* says you are investigating the accusations made against the hospital on 4 October.
>
> I welcome this, since I firmly believe the attack was personal and unrelated to the care the hospital provides. Although the citizens of Whitney can voice their complaints before the Board, it should be in a more civilized manner than what occurred at the meeting.
>
> I assure you I will not ignore attacks that could destroy the hospital's excellent reputation and its demonstrated ability to render service.
>
> Very truly yours,
> Simon Davidson, M.D.

Bascom's letter to the *Times* was brief:

> I sincerely hope Dr. Davidson will provide a quality hospital to the community at a price it can afford.

Two days later Davidson's letter appeared above his own on the *Times*'s editorial page. Immediately below his was one from a mother entitled, "Best Hospital in the State." According to the woman, her daughter had just spent a month at WCH and had found the place spotless, the food excellent, and the prices much cheaper than in Phoenix. So cheap in fact, that she could afford a two-week vacation in Hawaii with the money she saved by going to

Dr. Davidson's institution instead of the University Hospital in Phoenix.

"Alien life does exist on earth," he mumbled as he dropped the newspaper into the trashcan by his desk.

Chapter 18

It was October 10, the day of her wedding, and Evelyn, radiant in her simple blue dress and flat heeled shoes, stood next to Ben and studied her reflection in the gilded mirror that rested on the mantelpiece in her living room.

"Do you think anyone will notice, Ben?" she asked, turning her head from side to side and up and down.

"It would be hard not to," he laughed, buttoning his tuxedo jacket. "But no one will mention it. I did offer to match up."

"No, that's OK," she said, leaning over and kissing him on the cheek. "Accidents happen."

At nine-thirty, thirty minutes before the ceremony was to begin, Ben, Evelyn and her son Ronald climbed into his old Buick. It was a beautiful, warm day without a cloud in the sky when they arrived at North Park twenty minutes later.

A traveling carnival had pitched its tents in the middle of the park a day earlier, and children, screaming with delight, streamed through its arched gateway, dragging their parents behind them.

Ben, on his return from Phoenix, had parked outside its entrance, and had limped over to the man in charge of the merry-go-round.

After a long discussion, he handed him a small package.

"Remember, ten sharp!" Ben emphasized, before returning to his rusting jalopy.

"I'll be here," the man grinned, massaging the back of his neck.

Now he stood in front of the merry-go-round in his spotless tuxedo, with Evelyn and Ronald in tow. Father Hartnet, an old family friend, paced back and forth, his bible resting on his rotund gut. After every few steps, he would stop, sniff the aroma of grilled sausage wafting through the air, lick his fat lips, and then resume his pacing.

At the same time Evelyn was studying her reflection in the mirror, Bascom took his 1845 leather bound copy of *Religio Medici*, 'The Religion of a Doctor,' by Sir Thomas Browne, Kt. MD., from his suitcase of Italian treasures, and gift wrapped it. He and Cristina had discovered the small volume in a bookstore behind Bologna's Cathedral of San Petronio during one of their exploratory treks through the ancient city.

Dr. Browne's meant his philosophical work to encourage man to follow his own religious beliefs and to honor his creator by examining His handiwork. Bascom felt Ben was the only physician in Whitney who would appreciate the book. He would lend it to him permanently, since the old man had firmly refused a wedding gift.

At nine forty-five, Bascom, in his best jeans, sport shirt and corduroy jacket, arrived at the park. He parked his SUV next to Ben’s jalopy, and crossed the weed-infested field to the carnival’s entrance. Ignoring bellowing barkers in clown suits and the children running willy-nilly in the crowd, he arrived at the merry-go-round where Ben, Evelyn, and two men were conversing among themselves.

"Hi, Bapple. Do you get it yet?" Ben yelled over the cacophony of voices. His powdered toupee leaned precari-

ously to one side, his bent ear preventing it from becoming an epaulet.

"Get WHAT!?" Bascom shouted back, his hands encircling his mouth like a fleshy megaphone. Ben's question frustrated him. The old man asked him the same question every time they met, but he would never explain what it meant.

"I'm glad you could make it," he said, vigorously shaking Bascom's hand when they were together. Evelyn, beaming with delight in her blue dress and purple hair, stopped spinning the white plastic band on her left ring finger.

"Dr. Bascom, I'd like you to meet my son, Ronald," she said, resting her hand on the arm of the man by her side. He was fit and in his forties, and only his crooked nose, which according to Helen was a "gift" from his father, marred his good looks. He wore a finely tailored suit and a Breitling aviator's watch over his shirt cuff, as did Gianni Agnelli, the deceased heir to an Italian automobile dynasty.

"I'm honored to meet you," he said, shaking Bascom's hand. "My parents speak fondly of you."

"It's my pleasure, Ronald," Bascom said with a nod.

"And this is Father Hartnet," Evelyn added. The rotund priest smiled through pursed lips and daintily shook the tips of Bascom's fingers.

"Let's go, kids," Ben ordered. "God can wait, but I can't. The pill lasts for only four hours, and Ev and I have some more fun things to do before it peters out. I mean, stops working." Evelyn blushed and coyly kissed him on the cheek.

"Behave, Ben," she whispered in his ear while unobtrusively pushing his toupee into place.

"I’m being as upstanding as I can," he whispered back.

The merry-go-round slowed to a halt and Ben scooted

the entourage onto it. "Evelyn and I will ride the middle horses," he explained to the gathering. "Mine goes up and down but hers doesn't, so we'll have to allow for that when I place the ring on her finger."

"The ring?" Bascom asked in a panic, waving his hand to get Ben’s attention. "Where is it?"

"It's in there, tied to a big brass one, Bascue," he replied, pointing to a notched wooden beam extending from a pole near the edge of the ride.

"You'll mount the bounding steed next to Evelyn's, and grab it as we go by. You miss it and we don't get married."

Bascom laughed.

"Father," Ben said quickly, "you'll sit backwards on the lion in front of us. And Ronald, you're in the flying turtle behind your mom.

“Are we all ready?"

After an enthusiastic, “Yes!” from the wedding party, Ben made a circular movement of his upraised arm. "I planned this trip to marital bliss with the engineer of this contraption," he said, grinning from ear to ear. The carny in grease-stained overalls, rolled his eyes and leaned on his lever. The wooden animals slowly sprang to life.

"We're off!" Ben exclaimed as curious onlookers lined the ride's circumference. The merry-go-round picked up speed, carnival music plinked loudly, and within moments Bascom's horse was bobbing up and down, Ronald's turtle was lurching forward, rising, then falling backwards, Father Hartnet was flipping through his bible on his lion, and old Ben was whipping his bucking wooden charger with one hand and holding Evelyn's with the other.

"Dearly beloved we gather here," the priest began in a shrill voice as Bascom, intent on retrieving the brass ring, lunged towards the wooden arm. His horse dove at the last second and he missed it.

The crowd booed.

"Come on, Bottle!' Wiggins chided, interrupting the priest's droll litany. "Get that ring!"

"I will, Ben," he replied, "hold your horses. I'll get it the next time 'round."

"… today to join this couple in holy matrimony," the priest moaned. He raised an arm to get everyone's attention, but all eyes were on Bascom, who failed a second time to snatch the ring.

The crowd booed even louder.

Ronald, a light shade of green and lurching piteously to and fro in his turtle, feebly announced he was about to leave his breakfast in its shell. Bascom ignored his plight since he had a more important job to do. As he again prepared to snatch the ring that was fast approaching, the priest muttered, "Let him come (burp) forward. 'Scuse me."

The music roared as Bascom's wooden stallion reared on its third approach to the brass ring. "Go! Go! Go!" the crowd chanted as he stood on the saddle's outer stirrup and rested his left knee on the horse's back.

"Bury me with Custer! No! With Marilyn Monroe," he yelled as he stretched for the ring.

"Get it, Blarney!" Ben yelled, now beating his wooden steed with both reins.

Bascom's foot slid from the stirrup and he swung out towards the crowd as he was slipping his finger through the ring. "I'm falling, Ben!" he yelled.

"Do you, Evelyn, take this man?" the priest droned, oblivious to Bascom's plight.

People yelled and scattered from the path of the falling doctor. Ben's toupee fell onto Evelyn's lap as he stretched over her to grab Bascom's coattails, almost toppling off his horse during his heroic rescue. As he pulled Bascom back onto his saddle, Ronald's turtle lurched sideways, and his

color changed from green to gray. He covered his mouth, but it was too late.

"Hooray, Bolton!" Ben shouted, sitting back in his saddle. "You got it!" He took his toupee from Evelyn's outstretched hand and stuck it on his head as Bascom untied a huge princess cut diamond in a platinum engagement ring from its bronze casing and held it up for all to see. The crowd cheered as Evelyn's eyes widened in joyful surprise.

"I do," Evelyn grinned to the priest who was still droning on as if he performed similar ceremonies every day.

"Give it over, Basket," Ben yelled. Bascom handed him the ring, and then brought his hands to the sides of his head. He spun them ninety degrees, hoping Ben would understand and straighten his hairpiece.

"And do you, Benjamin, take Evelyn to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have any other," Wiggins said proudly as he placed the ring on her finger. He then winked at Bascom before adjusting his toupee.

"I now pronounce you man and (burp) wife."

Ben leaned over and kissed Evelyn. "I love you, Ev," he said, "and I always will. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Evelyn wrapped her arms about her husband's neck. "I love you too, Ben," she cried, overwhelmed with joy. "You're a great man and I'm ecstatic we're finally married."

They kissed and the crowd roared its deafening approval. The carny yelled, "Yahoo, Cowboy!" pulled on his lever, and the merry-go-round slowed to a stop. The newlyweds dismounted their tethered horses while Bascom pried Ronald's white-knuckled hands from the turtle shell and helped him from the beast. Ben handed the carny an envelope, and then, like a victorious boxer, raised his stretched arms, fists clenched, to the crowd that was clapping and

wishing him good luck and happiness.

"Now then," he said as he led his guests to a nearby hot dog stand, "it's time for lunch. With or without mustard?" Bascom and Father Hartnet opted for mustard and sauerkraut on the foot-long wieners, but Ronald, now a lighter but still remarkable shade of green, declined the offer.

"Thanks for coming, Biscuit," Wiggins said to Bascom. "It wouldn't have been the same without you."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I'd like you to have this," he said, taking Browne's book from his jacket pocket. "It's a loan, not a gift."

Ben gave his friend a hug. "Thanks," he said, slipping the package into his tuxedo pocket. "I'll open it later."

"Good luck," Bascom mumbled, taking a bite of his hot dog. He frowned and washed his lips with his tongue as he walked over to Evelyn.

"I'm happy for you, Ev," he said. He tossed the rancid wiener into a bin and put his arm through hers.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, studying her drawn face. Ben perked up at the unexpected question.

"Something *is* wrong! I knew it!" he murmured as he eavesdropped on their conversation.

"I still stumble, Robert, but I'll be all right," she replied, holding up her hand and twisting it back and forth. Under the sparkling diamond was a thin white plastic band.

"What's that?" Bascom asked, pointing to the band.

"My engagement ring, but it’s now become my wedding band," she laughed. "We were shopping in Clark’s when Ben asked me to marry him. He unscrewed the cap on a coffee creamer container, pulled off the tab and slipped it onto my finger as an engagement ring. When he knelt down to propose, the store manager thought he was having a stroke and called nine-one-one.

“It was a scene to remember!"

"I wish I could have been there," Bascom laughed. He raised a questioning eyebrow as he studied her purple hair.

"Ben looks happier than I've ever seen him."

"I love that man more than I can say, Robert. He's the reason I'm alive today. And Ben did it," she said, answering his unspoken question about her coiffure. "He said gray hair made me look old, so he dyed it himself. I'm just glad it didn't turn out pink. I hate old ladies with pink hair. He felt so bad when he saw the result, he offered to dye his toupee a matching color. I told him it wasn't necessary."

"Gosh, Ev, you're not old," he insisted, squeezing her hand. "But no tattoos and no body-piercing, OK? Can you imagine what wrinkled tattoos on an eighty year-old lady must be like?"

"No, and I'd rather not. Yuck!" She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "No tattoos and no piercings, I promise."

They hugged as Ben called out behind them, "It's time to see Ev's wedding gift, everybody."

He led the group to the new red Lexus SC convertible with tan leather interior that he had bought in Phoenix the day before. As the salesman had promised, during the wedding ceremony someone from the dealership had parked it in the far end of the field, and towed away his relic from a bygone era. A giant gold bow clipped to huge sign on the Lexus’s trunk read, "I love you, Ev. Ben."

Like the teenager who spray-paints his amorous message on a bridge over a busy highway, the old man wanted the world to know Evelyn was the love of his life.

Chapter 19

A few days after the wedding, Bascom invited Donna to dine with him at *Il Pappagallo* – the Parrot, in Phoenix. That night, dressed in his usual sport coat and jeans, he knocked on her cottage door.

She was even more beautiful than the mental image of her that had occupied most of his waking hours. Even without makeup, her oval face, framed by a cascade of reddish-brown hair, was radiant. The designer lenses perched on her perky nose accented her brown, soul-piercing eyes. A tiny birthmark on her cheek, barely visible under the frames of her glasses, was a *neo* on perfection.

The beads of the jade necklace on her silk blouse rolled sensuously over her breasts, and her short skirt displayed her shapely legs to erotic perfection.

"Flattery, even silent flattery, will get you everywhere," she grinned.

"Someday you'll be on a postage stamp honoring the most beautiful woman in the world," he replied.

"I'll repay that compliment later tonight," she purred. She closed the door and they walked arm in arm to the SUV.

The Parrot, a recently opened restaurant in a high-end mall in a nearby city, was small but cozy. Its faux columns and plaster statuary were a tacky copy of its famous counterpart in Bologna's historic center, but its food was gen-

uine *bolognese*. Bascom had eaten there when he needed a respite from Whitney's drive-through restaurants, and had promised its jovial owner he would return.

"Ben tornato, dottore," the middle-aged man in a black tuxedo and bow tie said when he saw them. He was short, dark-haired, plump, and spoke with an accent that came from an area far south of Bologna.

"Welcome back. You have a beautiful woman with you."

Donna smiled at the compliment.

"It's good to see you again, Marcello," he replied, shaking his hand. "I told Donna you serve the only authentic bolognese food in Arizona, and she's eager to taste it."

"You are too kind, dottore. I'll prepare a meal that will be better than anything you've eaten anywhere in Italy. Please follow me."

He led them to a table in a quiet corner of the room where a young man in a white shirt, black vest, and an apron tied at his waist was waiting. He seated them and handed them leather bound menus.

"Cosa posso portarvi da bere, signori?" the curly-haired waiter asked. "What can I bring you to drink?"

"Una bottiglia di San Pellegrino gassata."

"Sparkling water only, dottore?" The young man raised an eyebrow, scandalized that someone would refuse to drink wine during a meal. "We have just received a shipment of Barolo from Piemonte. I know it's your favorite, and it's excellent."

"Barolo *is* my favorite wine," he said. "But tonight I'll just have water, grazie.

"Donna?" Bascom asked.

"I'll have water too, thank you."

The waiter nodded. "Would you like an antipasto?"

"Not tonight. What's your special?"

"*Lasagna verde*. It's delicious."

"Good. We'll have it, plus a rucola salad and a selection of grilled meats."

"Subito, dottore," he said before walking to the kitchen.

"Spinach added to the dough makes green lasagna a specialty," Bascom explained. "Since I couldn't speak Italian when I first arrived in the old city, I ordered it whenever I could afford to eat out, until I learned what the other foods on the menu were.

"Sorry you missed the wedding," he added, caressing her hand.

"I would have been there had I not missed my flight from New York. But I heard about it from a friend. She still laughs every time she talks about your clumsy attempts to snare Evelyn's ring."

"It *was* a memorable event. Ben is nuts, but madly in love."

"Madly in love, but certainly not nuts," she corrected gently, "although he likes to make people think he is. When I first got to town a nurse told me he was a walking textbook. She said he was a firebrand in his early years, a crusader who cut down bad docs with impunity. He's calmed down since then, but I can tell you he still terrifies our doctors, even if they pretend he doesn't.

"Anyway I hate weddings. They make me bawl my eyes out. I don't know why. Must be some love-hate thing, but it happens every time."

"Odd," Bascom replied. "So how was your day?"

"Wonderful," she grunted through tight lips. "Two patients died, and one was only eighteen. I had a fight with one of your favorite docs who thought he knew it all. He would have too, had he also known he's an idiot. Then I had to take a cold shower since my water heater broke, and

I *hate* cold showers. I'm so hyper I could strangle Godzilla with my bare hands.

“Anything else you'd like to know?" she asked, wiping an eye with the back of her hand.

"Had I not seen it," he said, "I wouldn't have believed it."

"Seen what?" she snorted.

"You're beautiful even when you're angry," he replied, running a finger over her neatly trimmed nails, each of which bore a different sign of the zodiac in red on a gold background. He thought he would enjoy searching for the two missing signs later that evening.

"Robby, that's not fair. I earned the right to be angry," she said. Her frown turned into a smile.

"And you're even more beautiful when you smile," he added.

The waiter brought the sparkling water, filled their glasses, and placed the bottle in the center of the table before leaving.

"By the way, I read the letters to the editor in the Whitney rag. Any more news from Davidson?" she asked as she sipped her water.

"No, but you can be sure he's plotting his revenge."

"I'm still glad you spoke up at the meeting. Maybe you did some good."

"Words are weak weapons against greed," he said with a shrug as he spun his glass by its stem. "Money is the problem in medicine today. We waste billions on unnecessary tests, and incompetent or dishonest doctors steal more. All this would stop if patients paid their own bills.

“The government could insure major medical disasters, but if patients had to pay for their run-of-the-mill diseases, they would seek competent doctors who charged reasonable fees, and abandon the crooks.

"There would no longer be a need for HMOs like the one in California that pays *each* of its top three executives twelve million dollars a year! Can you imagine how many requests for care it must reject to pay those bozos their thirty-six million bucks?"

He flicked his finger against his glass a few times, causing bubbles to rise to the surface and pop in a tiny spray.

"And talk about scams!" he went on distractedly. "If you want to raise the price of a piece of cheap plastic from five cents to fifty dollars, just say it's for 'medical use.'

"Basta! I shouldn't be talking about medical corruption now. It'll ruin our appetites."

The waiter arrived with their oversized portions of green lasagna, placed the plates on the table in front of them, and then left.

"Tell me about Florence. I hear it's a tourist trap," Donna asked as she tasted a corner of her green pasta.

Bascom smiled. "Every city in Italy is a tourist trap, but they're still beautiful. You just need to know how to avoid the scams."

"This lasagna is excellent!" she said after swallowing her first morsel. "When we go, will you show me how?"

"Who said we were going?"

"Aren't we?"

Bascom smiled. "Maybe. You're right. These lasagne really are delicious."

After devouring the grilled sausage and steak, and too full to taste the exotic desserts, Bascom paid the bill and they left the restaurant.

They walked down the quiet, tree-lined street outside the mall holding hands, stopping occasionally to hug and kiss in the shadows like two teenagers experiencing love for the first time.

The lasagna verde had stirred Bascom's memories of his student years, and during the drive back to Whitney, he described the dizzying climb up the four hundred and ninety-eight rickety and irregularly spaced stairs to the top of the *Torre degli Asinelli*. The three hundred and twenty feet tall tower, built in the twelfth century by the noble Asinelli family, stands fifty yards from the original Pappagallo restaurant, in the heart of the city known as *Felsinea* to the Etruscans. The prize at the top of the tower was a view of the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, but the furthest he could see on that overcast day was the roof of his orange apartment building a few miles away.

He parked in front of Donna's home and they walked to her door with linked arms. She opened it and asked with a mischievous smile, "Would you like to come in for a nightcap?"

"Yes, I would," he said, stepping over the threshold.

Chapter 20

Well before Helen told him someone wanted to see him, well before the pile of patients' hospital bills sitting on his desk grew taller than his coffee cup, and well before the Board had decided if the new clinic conflicted with the town's best interests, Bascom had been searching for a way to expose Davidson's billing schemes to the townspeople. The hospital owner had told the Board his doctors had *unanimously* chosen his new laboratory, but Bascom knew nothing of the decision. He needed to know what exactly the agreement was between him and his new laboratory.

As fortune would have it, a week after the Wiggins's wedding the answer arrived in his office with Rupert Hayward, a representative of Mansfield Laboratories. The congenial, prematurely balding youth had sold Bascom several used machines for his mini-laboratory, and they had become friends and had enjoyed occasional lunches together.

"Good-bye?" Bascom echoed in amazement after their handshake. "Why, Rup?"

"Lavabo Labs has taken over at the hospital, and I'm going to sell boats and fishing gear in Washington with my family," the young man replied. He sat in front of the desk, and placed his briefcase on it before taking a bent cigarette from his jacket pocket and sticking it between his lips. He had quit smoking to silence Bascom's constant harangue about the evils of nicotine, but he could not break the me-

chanics of the habit. Several times a day he would pull out a cigarette, take a puff, blow an imaginary smoke ring, flick off a non-existent ash, and return it to his pocket. Strands of tobacco would fall from its paper casing each time he performed the ritual, and by the end of the day the cigarette would become so ragged and bent, it looked like he was sucking on a strand of overcooked fettuccine.

"What do you know about them?" Rupert asked. He pursed his lips and blew an imaginary smoke ring before returning the cigarette to his pocket.

"Nothing. I've never even heard of them," Bascom answered, settling in his chair.

Rupert snapped the brass locks of his briefcase, pulled out a newspaper clipping, and handed it over the desk.

"Read this," he ordered.

The Wall Street Journal article described kick-backs from laboratories to doctors amounting to two billion dollars of the twenty billion dollars they earned yearly. One company, Appletree Clinical Research Laboratories in San Francisco, had paid almost three million dollars in commissions to doctors in an eight-month period. The government had also accused it of buying a seventeenth century Italian painting for an ex-physician now in hospital administration, for fraudulently processing blood specimens for another laboratory, and for defrauding Blue Cross and Medicaid.

"Interesting," he said, pushing the clipping back across his desk, "but what does Appletree have to do with Lavabo?"

"They're all Appletree. It changes its name after each indictment."

"WHAT!" Bascom exclaimed, bolting upright in his chair. "How do you know?"

"It's my job, or it was," he said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “The lab is under federal investigation un-

der both names.”

"Does our lab chief know about this?"

Rupert, shook his head."I don’t think so, but Dr. Volkers is too honest to get involved with these crooks."

"That's a relief. Who's the Lavabo rep in this area?"

"Leslie Kirwan, one of the finest pieces of ass you'll ever meet," he said, licking his lips. Rupert rummaged again through his briefcase and pulled out a calling card.

"This is her number. She shares her shapely wares privately in motels, in case her smile alone doesn't convince you to use her lab."

As he read the name on the card, Bascom felt a Cyclopean cacodemon claw into his body, a devil intent on rummaging through his every ligament and muscle in search of the quintessential reason for his stubborn adherence to a self-appointed task. He wished the creature would find it, strike off its figurative head, and impale it on a spike in WCH's parking lot.

"Thanks for the info, Rup," Bascom said. He dropped the card on his desk and stood from his chair. "I'm sorry you're leaving, but I wish you luck in your new venture."

"I don't like the rain in Seattle that much, but it's better than the desert dust that clogs my sinuses.

"Come up and I'll take you fishing," he promised.

"I'll do that," Bascom said before they shook hands and parted company. Helen entered the office moments later.

"Problems?" she inquired, picking up a pencil stub with a broken point from his desk.

"Naturally," he said, handing her the card. "Ask Miss Kirwan to stop by."

"Right, Boss," she replied. She tossed the pencil into the wastepaper basket, but quickly retrieved it. "We can't afford to waste supplies. I'll try to sharpen this one more time," she said before taking the card and returning to her

office. Minutes later Bascom heard the pencil sharpener grind, a sorrowful "darn!" and then the pencil hitting an empty metal can.

The next day Leslie Kirwan, a pretty, well-endowed redhead in her late twenties arrived in Bascom's office with a briefcase full of what he was certain would be good news for the right people. *It's too small to contain a painting, but a check for kickbacks would fit easily.*

"Good day, Miss Kirwan," he said cheerfully. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, doctor. How did you hear of us?" she asked with a smile only an orthodontist could have created. Her silk shift barely covered a body so perfect, it had to have been designed in a laboratory based on the PET scan of some randy male's brain.

"Your reputation is well-known, Miss Kirwan," he said with a hint of irony.

"How nice! Call me Leslie," she beamed, smoothing her unwrinkled blouse.

And you call me Doctor. "Well, Leslie, tell me about your company," he insisted as she sat on the edge of her chair. He knew she would never tell all, but he would accept any information that would expose Davidson's latest scheme.

"We supply everything you need," she explained, aiming her perky breasts at him as if they were ray guns ready to disintegrate any resistance on his part. "We pick up your specimens daily and email you the results within twenty-four hours."

"How are your prices?" *And point those things elsewhere. If they explode, I'll never get the silicone off my clothes.*

"Unbeatable. We have three lists," she explained, tak-

ing a few brochures from her briefcase. She held them fan-like and pointed to each as she described them, "one for Medicaid, one for your cash paying patients, and one for your insured patients."

Ding! You lose, but thanks for playing. The law requires you to charge each patient the same price for the same services, no matter his ability to pay.

"May I see them?" he asked innocently.

"Certainly," she answered, handing them over without hesitation. "I can begin servicing you tomorrow."

"I'm sure you can, Leslie, I'm sure you can," he said. He shook the scene from his mind and flipped through the lists.

"The sooner we start, the sooner you'll begin receiving your commission checks."

"How much would they be?"

"Twenty-five percent of our stated fees."

"Sounds enticing. I'll call you in a few days."

"Great," she cooed, again smoothing her non-wrinkled silk blouse as she stood. "Would you like my home number?"

"No," he replied firmly. Leslie wrote it on her card and placed it on Bascom's desk before leaving the office.

He was reviewing her price lists when Fran popped her head in the door.

"You still alive, Doc?" the pretty nurse asked with a grin. "No chest pains from performing uncommon exertion? Friction burns on your cheeks, perhaps?"

"That’s subtle. Jealous?" he asked with mocking chagrin.

"Nope," she replied, her eyes sparkling behind tinted glasses. "I just don't want a Jezebel to lead my doctor down the path to perdition."

"I feel so safe when you protect me from me," he

laughed. "What do you want?"

"You've got a patient in two."

Bascom dropped the brochures on his desk, walked to the room, and took the chart from the metal rack on the door. Henry Lord, a mentally retarded twelve-year-old boy who grunted loudly or softly depending on his needs, was coughing fitfully when he entered the room.

"Hello, Mr. Lord," he stated. "How are you and Henry today?"

"I'm fine, but Henry ain't," he said in a huff. "I took him to the ED t'other day, and they did all these here tests, but he's still coughin'." Bascom glanced through the wad of laboratory slips the man handed him.

"Wow!" he exclaimed when he realized what serendipity had bestowed on him. "Do you have the bill for these?"

"It's in there," he replied heatedly, pointing to the papers. "I gave 'em Hank's health card, but they still wants *me* to pay this here bill. I ain't got much money, Doc. I can't pay this."

"You won't have to. I'll handle it," he replied, placing the documents on his small desk.

Bascom then examined Henry, and after suggesting an inexpensive over-the-counter remedy for his simple cold and sending him home, ran to his desk to compare Henry's bill to the lists Leslie had left him. Her laboratory was charging the boy $119.00. Not only did the price differ from those specified in her brochures, it was higher than the highest of the three.

After his last patient left that afternoon, Bascom took the bill to Harrison Volkers, the hospital pathologist. When he entered his laboratory, the thin, fifty-year-old doctor, whose face bore the scars of a lost battle against acne, was peering into a microscope.

"Welcome, friend. Have a seat," he said heartily,

pulling a stool from under the bench. "I'm just checking a tumor from a patient with blood pressure crises. Steele diagnosed a pheochromocytoma and Thompson removed it, just like in a real hospital. Take a look," he said excitedly, pointing to the second set of objectives on his microscope.

Bascom peered into the eyepieces as Harrison described the histology of the lesion.

After his crash course in rare diseases, Bascom handed him Henry's bill. "Those charges aren't on any of Lavabo's lists," he said.

"I don't doubt it," Harrison reflected grimly, scanning the document. "Davidson's got his own lists for everything. I'll check and get back to you."

After running a mile that evening, as he had been doing for weeks in an attempt to return to his form when Cristina was alive, Bascom soaked his sore muscles in a warm bath until the water cooled, forcing him from the tub. He was drying off when his phone rang.

"I can't figure out how many price lists Lavabo has," Harrison said quickly. "Henry's bill was for one hundred nineteen dollars. Your list says fifty-one dollars, mine says sixty dollars, and they billed state for two hundred dollars, even though its reimbursement rate is forty dollars."

"Can you do anything about this?"

"You bet. Davidson drops this lab or I call in state investigators. Lavabo has been fined before, but he hasn't yet, that I know of anyway. I presume he'd rather avoid that distinction."

"That's great," Bascom said. "Oh, by the way, have you heard anything about kickbacks or free paintings?"

"Nobody has offered me anything, except Miss Kirwan. I'm a vegetarian, so I turned down her meaty offer," he laughed. "I'll take care of this bill. Mr. Lord is off the

hook."

"I wish I were as efficient as you are, Harrison. Thanks."

Bascom had decided not to attend the Board's end of October emergency meeting to resolve its conflicts with Davidson, since he felt another shouting match would be unproductive. But on the morning after the meeting he called Dave Olsen to learn its decision. According to his secretary, he was recovering from an all night interview with a red-haired reporter. She promised she would have her boss call him as soon as possible.

He was in bed reading a book on medieval architecture when his phone rang that evening. *Finally recovered, eh, Olsen?* He picked up the receiver, but the gravelly voice was not the lawyer's.

"Hi, Bob, how are you?" Thompson asked. He had not spoken to the obese surgeon since he betrayed him at the Board meeting, and his anger quickly welled.

"I was doing just fine until you called," he grunted.

"Davidson's pissed."

"Aw. That makes my day. Why?"

"Harrison made him get rid of Lavabo Labs, and the Board made him close down his clinic since it was a conflict of interest and ran up patient bills."

"Aw, shucks," Bascom replied sarcastically. "If I caused any of that, I don't apologize."

"He told me he intends to run you out of town."

"Won't happen. What else did the spiffy dwarf say?"

"Lots. But I warned him not to make any more changes without consulting the staff first."

"Did you threaten to sit on him if he did?"

"Like I said," he replied, ignoring the insult, "he wants you out of town."

"I will decide when to leave here, not him. Capisci, testa di cazzo?”

"He demands a meeting with you."

"He'll first have to kneel and kiss my dic.., er, ring."

"He's sending someone from San Francisco to talk to you," Thompson insisted.

"I'm shaking all over," Bascom said, slamming the receiver into its cradle.

Chapter 21

Bascom was on the phone with Dave Olsen when Ben knocked on his office door a few days later. The old man's wig was askew, and he had a wild look in his eye. "Mind if I come in?" he grinned as he entered the room. Bascom nodded and waved him into the chair in front of his desk.

"I *won't* meet Davidson's representative without a witness, Dave," he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Cohen and that fat bastard Thompson will deny what they say, or change what I say, at any meeting not monitored by the UN."

He listened a moment and then replied, "Then I won't go," and hung up.

"What's up, Ben?" he asked. He leaned back and put his feet up on the corner of his desk.

"You're really battling that hospital," he replied.

"Every morning I promise myself I'll stop, but something always pulls me back into the fray by noon. I need a prescription for Soma, the euphoria-producing drug Huxley described in his *Brave New World*."

"It doesn't work, and you're right not to meet those people alone." Ben shook his head. "Can't trust 'em. Wear a wire if you do. You can easily hide a tape recorder under your jacket."

"Would you come with me?" Bascom asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Nope, I don't have your courage or foolhardiness. Besides, I'll be dead by the time you go to trial."

"Trial?" he repeated. "What trial?"

"Your clash is between morality and capitalism, and capitalism always wins. To you medicine is a ‘poor mistress,’ to Davidson she's a ‘wealthy whore.’ If you don't kowtow to him, he'll sue you and order his doctors to devour your practice and to destroy your reputation. And believe me, they'll happily comply just to get rid of you. Incompetent doctors don't want competent ones looking over their shoulders.

"This meeting, if you decide to go, will be your last chance to repent before your indoctrination into manhood."

Ben leaned back in his chair and locked his fingers behind his head. His gray eyes silently challenged Bascom’s. *"Well, whippersnapper, what are you made of?"* they asked.

After a minute or two, Ben unlocked his fingers and leaned forward in his chair. "I stopped by to thank you for being my best man," he said. "But Ev and I were disappointed you came alone. We were sure you'd bring Donna."

"What made you think I might?"

"I saw you two leave the cafeteria together after our meeting with Davidson. You looked like a perfect match. It's obvious she adores you."

Bascom nodded. "She wanted to come, but missed her flight and arrived home after it was over," he explained.

"Right," Ben replied with a nod. "She told us about her trip. If you intend to continue your fight against WCH, you'll need someone tough, understanding, smart, and especially loyal, at your side. Donna is that person. I always rated her the best nurse in the hospital. After Ev, of course."

"Of course," Bascom laughed. "I'm sure she is, but too

much dependence on her could lead to a long-term relationship. I'm not ready for that yet. Besides, I don't need support to continue this absurd protest, I need someone to convince me to drop it."

"You'd never do that, no matter who tried to convince you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I know your type," Ben said, rubbing his chin. "You'd rather die than walk away from Davidson. Anyway thanks for this gem," he said, taking the *Religio Medici* from his pocket and tapping its cover. "I loved it. It reminded me of the old days of medicine. Where did you find it?"

"In an ancient bookstore in the heart of Bologna. Cris and I enjoyed exploring the dustiest, dingiest looking shops we could find on our trips throughout Italy. We often uncovered treasures not even the shop owners remembered having."

"Cris was your wife?" Ben asked. Bascom nodded and studied his feet on the desk.

"You never talk about her."

"I know." He knitted his eyebrows together as he recalled their last moments together.

"She must have been quite a woman," Ben offered, as he straightened his wig.

"She was. We met in a head-on skiing accident," Bascom said. He leaned down to close a desk drawer that was open a quarter of an inch. "In a restaurant that night, she told me she was a nurse at Sant'Orsola, the hospital where I was doing my internship. A week later she complained to me that a professor had prescribed a medication that was killing one of her patients.

"Suggesting a demigod made a mistake is enough to get you blackballed in Italy if you're a doctor. If you're a nurse, well, let's not get too graphic." He paused, remem-

bering that fateful day.

"As an intern," Bascom explained slowly, “I was in no position to help her, but she was right. When I couldn't convince the professor of the danger, I pulled the IV out of his patient's arm right in front of him. He wanted us off the staff, among other unpleasantness. When the truth came out, he dropped his complaint to avoid further embarrassment.

“From that time on we were inseparable."

"I can see why you loved her," Ben nodded.

"We had a few wonderful years together, but a few lifetimes wouldn't have been enough," he said as a tear appeared in the corner of his eye. "Sorry," he said, wiping it away with a finger. "Desert dust gets into everything."

"It's worse when it covers your sheets," Ben laughed. "It makes sleeping in the nude feel like you're lying on the beach. And they become sandpaper if you're floundering around on them. How did she die?"

"A truck ran her over the night before we were to return to Italy. I had accepted the job as her hometown's doctor, and we were both excited about the move back to the old country," Bascom replied. His gut cramped painfully as he related the story, just as it did in the ED that fateful night.

"I was in my office listening to Beethoven's 'Fűr Elise' and talking to Lance Berkford, a friend and colleague," he related, "when they called her code. She was in cardiac arrest when we got to her moments later. She died in my arms.

"We brought her back to Italy for burial," Bascom continued, again wiping an eye. "I opened my practice in Lizzano as we had planned, but I couldn't go on without her. Due to a bad habit I picked up after her death, I had to close my office a couple of months later."

"Did you blame yourself for her death?" Ben asked, scratching his chin.

Bascom took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "I still do," he nodded, slowly refolding the cloth. "She had asked me to shop for ingredients for a special dinner she was preparing for us. I was busy and told her to go herself. Had I gone shopping for her that night, she'd be alive today. Knowing that I caused her death, even indirectly, or that I couldn't save her, will haunt me forever."

"Could anyone have saved her?" Wiggins's voice was soft, cuddly, inviting. Bascom knew the old physician was coaxing his demon to the surface, and it frightened him.

"No." His lower lip trembled. "No one could."

Ben massaged one knobby hand with the other. "You didn't cause Cris's death," he said, "and, since no one could have saved her, you shouldn't blame yourself for it. Most of all, you shouldn't allow her death to cause yours.

"My son James died of an overdose of pain pills years ago," he related thoughtfully. "Abe Grimes prescribed them for my wife and she gave them to our son. I ordered them to stop, but they continued behind my back.

"I made her life hell after he died, and when she couldn't take it any longer, she left. Everyone in town thinks I threw her out of the house, but that's not true. She left on her own.

“James was a rational adult with a bad habit that killed him. But we were all to blame for his death. Me for being too busy with my practice to notice his addiction, Grimes who prescribes narcotics to keep his patients happy and his bank account in the black, his mother for pampering him, and James himself for voluntarily taking a lethal dose of the drug and washing it down with alcohol.

"We suffer when our loved ones die, but we shouldn't punish ourselves if they themselves, or if the misdeeds of

others, caused their deaths."

Ben rested his chin on his fists. "After James died, I developed a bad habit, just like yours," he said, keeping a sharp eye on Bascom to see his reaction. Bascom winced when he realized his past drinking problem was no longer a secret.

"But as I was sliding into the abyss, Evelyn grabbed my hand and refused to let go. She saw something in me I didn't, and I still don't, but I'm grateful to her. Had I died when I wanted to, I would have missed the happiest part of my life."

"I've already lived the happiest part of mine," Bascom countered, looking down at his shoes.

"We'll see, we'll see. Well, I've got a date with my beautiful wife," Ben said as he walked to the door. "We're going to Phoenix for dinner, a play, and a night in a hotel on sand free sheets."

He tilted his wig to one side and disappeared into the hallway.

Chapter 22

It was an overcast day in mid-November, a rarity in southern Arizona, when Bascom trod the same cracked path to the hospital that he had for the first time a year earlier. Scaffolding surrounded the decrepit building, and Mexican workers, in yellow safety helmets and gray overalls, were setting orange tiles on its roof and refinishing its facade.

He had reluctantly agreed to meet Davidson's emissary after several cajoling phone calls from Thompson, but remained ambivalent about his decision. Dave Olsen had quit his post with the Board to accept a lucrative position as a pinstriped in-house counsel for Davidson. Without him Bascom would be entering the lion's den without a reliable witness to testify in court if Davidson should decide to sue him.

Yet to protect himself, he needed to know what punishment his foe would inflict upon him if he continued interfering in his affairs. Since he intended doing just that, he needed to know the risk he was taking.

Evelyn had told him that Ben had continued to meet with his colleagues to keep an eye on them. That, and the tape recorder the old doctor had suggested he carry in his jacket pocket, were the forces pushing him inexorably toward the hospital's twin glass doors.

He entered the building and sniffed the air. *Davidson*

hasn't eliminated Nevins's oil of wintergreen yet, he thought as he walked down the hallway. Joe Thompson, in a pinstriped suit and rocking on his heels like a lumpy tethered balloon, was waiting for him outside Cohen's office. The fat man offered his hand, but pulled it back nervously when Bascom ignored it.

"Have you seen George?" he asked the ceiling.

"Whose side are you on this time, Joe?"

"On the side of truth, as always," he said. His face turned a shade of beet red. "You know that I want nothing but the best for the citizens of this town. Er, maybe he's inside, Bob," he said uneasily before lumbering into the office.

Seconds later George Cohen appeared in the doorway, buttoning a new suede jacket. He was clean-shaven and perfumed, but dark patches under his eyes and white streaks in his once blond hair suggested stress had infiltrated his once easy job.

"I'm glad you could come, doctor," he said loudly enough for anyone in his office to hear. Then he whispered, "I'm sorry about this, Bob, but Dr. Davidson has ordered us to get rid of you. If we succeed, fat boy will get the directorship of the cardiovascular and orthopedic departments Davidson intends to open in a few months, and my salary will double.

"I've never told anyone before, but I have to support a disabled child and an ex-wife in LA. I don't agree with a lot that's happening here. Some of Davidson's ideas are way over the top, but I need this job.

"I won't help you in there, but I won't hurt you either. As a friend I suggest you drop this fight before it gets really messy, and it will. I assure you."

Bascom nodded and followed Cohen into the office where an elderly, casually dressed man was standing in the

middle of the room, waiting to greet him.

"Dr. Bascom?" he questioned sternly. "I'm Henry Rutledge. I'm pleased to meet you." His triangular face, coupled with his almond-shaped eyes gave him an Asian appearance, but his narrow, comb-like mustache was akin to that of a long-deceased dictator from Western Europe. To Bascom he was trouble from whichever geological direction he approached him.

"Same here," Bascom agreed. Rutledge shook his hand and then sat imperiously in a leather chair facing a new black velvet sofa. Cohen and Thompson sat in wicker chairs on his flanks. Bascom sat on the sofa, facing the lopsided inquisition.

"Dr. Davidson wants you to know he is unhappy with your exposure of matters he adamantly feels should remain private," the emissary declared. He swept his index finger and thumb down the sides of his jaw to his pointed chin like an irate father considering the punishment to impose on his wayward, poorly dressed child. Bascom opened his jacket so his tape recorder could capture Rutledge's every word.

"He demands you end the displays you have been staging, or face severe consequences."

"I thought this was going to be a friendly discussion, Mr. Rutledge, but I guess not. I suggest you save your threats for someone who depends upon your hospital to make a living, like Thompson," Bascom countered, nodding to the obese surgeon who was rolling his tilted head back on his fat neck, as if searching for a UFO on the ceiling.

"Your boss wants to economically rape this community, but I won't let him."

"What!" he spluttered. "Are you insinuating Dr. Davidson is dishonest?"

"I'm not 'insinuating,' anything. 'Honest Davidson' is an oxymoron. The man is a crook."

"You could face severe legal repercussions for that remark," Rutledge retorted. "I'd suggest you mind your insulting dialogue."

"And you yours," Bascom's face hardened, his eyes cold and unblinking. He leaned back and banged his penny loafers together.

"If you want to discuss the problems Davidson has created for this community, fine," he said after a few moments, "but if you're trying to intimidate me, you're wasting my time and yours."

Rutledge, Thompson and Cohen leaned away from him as if he were a stick of dynamite ready to explode.

"And your boss isn't the only bad apple here. For months I've received nothing but complaints about the unnecessary studies Evans orders in the ED," Bascom related. "To make matters worse, he is so incompetent, he can't arrive at a correct diagnosis *even with* all those tests.

"Someday he'll kill a patient, and, trust me, I will testify for the plaintiff."

"It's none of your business how Dr. Davidson runs his hospital!" Rutledge scolded, shaking his finger at Bascom. Thompson extracted his gold cigarette case from his pocket, but Rutledge frowned and covered it with his hand. Thompson quickly stuck it back in his pocket.

"Oh, but it is. It most certainly is," Bascom replied, running a hand through his hair. "Anything and everything that has to do with my patients' health and economic welfare is my business, from the time I first see them, until their tests are run, their diagnoses confirmed, and their therapy completed. And that especially includes everything that happens to them in this death trap."

"But– –" Rutledge started to say.

Bascom held up a hand. "Let me finish. An example might help you understand the situation. Suppose you call me at three a.m. because your child is ill," he said, pausing to let Rutledge create the scene in his mind.

"And suppose I tell you to go to the ED because I can't help you for whatever reason. You refuse, but I insist, assuring you he'll get proper care.

"You reluctantly go because you trust me and you know I would never tell you to do something that could endanger your child.

"Got the picture so far, Mr. Rutledge?" Bascom asked with a solemn face.

"Continue," he replied coldly, nodding his head slowly.

"Fine. So two days later you storm into my office and yell, 'they killed my little boy! How could you send me to that ED when you knew how dangerous that place is?'

"As the father of that dead child, Mr. Rutledge, how would you like to hear me to tell you: 'I knew that ED doc would eventually kill someone, but if I didn't send you to the hospital, Dr. Davidson would have been really angry with me. I'm sorry your child is dead, but I had no choice'?"

"A less dramatic scenario is also unacceptable as far as I'm concerned," Bascom interlocked his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "Suppose you are a farm worker earning a thousand dollars a month and the hospital charges you four thousand dollars to diagnose your son's constipation. Would you choose to buy food for your family, or would you pay the inflated hospital bill? And if you chose the former, what would you do when the hospital takes your tugurio, your hovel, to settle your bill?

"Mr. Rutledge," he concluded, "I want to be clear about this. My patients will *always* come before any contract, and Dr. Thompson knows that's true."

Rutledge turned a questioning eye to the obese surgeon fidgeting in his chair.

"You're being too hard on Dr. Davidson, Bob," Thompson said to a spot two feet above Bascom's head. "He's a nice guy. You shouldn't criticize him so much."

"How many shekels did you get for your greasy soul this time, Joe?" Bascom asked, his eyes narrowing in anger. Thompson reddened and fell silent.

"Doctor, what would you do if," Rutledge asked, rubbing the side of his head, "if Dr. Davidson were to authorize an investigation into your allegations and then, whether its results give them validity or not, he decided not to correct the situation to your satisfaction?"

Bascom leaned forward so his tape recorder could pick up every word of the conversation. "I'd consider our contract void and leave the hospital," he declared thoughtfully.

"I think that would be acceptable to Dr. Davidson," Rutledge immediately agreed.

Speak into the microphone, Rutledge.

"You are agreeing to let me resign from the hospital, without penalty of any type, if an investigation proves me right, and Davidson does nothing to correct the situation?" he asked.

"I am."

"Dr. Davidson specifically authorized you to make such an offer?"

"He did, however, only if you agree to stop persecuting him and his hospital."

"How about if the committee whitewashes the investigation?"

"You mean if it doesn't consider your complaints to be valid?"

"That's what I just said."

"I'm sure Dr. Davidson will be happy to let you resign

in that case also."

"So I can resign without penalty in either case. That's fair, but there is one more thing. My September and October rents are overdue, and I'd like a check for them this week."

"I'll talk with Dr. Davidson about that," Rutledge promised. "Oh, I almost forgot.," he added. "He's replacing you with Dr. Evans as ED Chief."

"No, he's not," Bascom retorted firmly, shaking his head. "Hospital bylaws specify a physician can hold office only after being on staff eight months, and Evans has a few months to go. I'd suggest he use them to study medicine while he's waiting for his promotion. Modern medical books are full of pictures, and I'll send him a big box of crayons so he can color them."

Rutledge recoiled at the criticism of Davidson's chosen aide, but quickly regained his composure. "I'll relay your messages to Dr. Davidson," he said, standing from his chair. They shook hands and Bascom left the office.

As he walked down the hallway leading to the hospital's exit, he turned off the tape recorder.

In his office that afternoon, Bascom took the tape recorder from his jacket pocket and turned it on. Nothing happened. He cursed under his breath as he replaced the batteries, rewound the tape, and played it back. The last recorded words were Joe Thompson's. "On the side of truth, as always," he said.

Three days later, in the middle of his lunch hour, Helen announced with a snort that Thompson wanted to see him.

"Frisk him for a weapon before you let him in," Bascom said as he bit into his turkey sandwich.

"I'll have to don my rubber gloves first," she said wryly

as she left the office.

When his uninvited guest appeared in the doorway in a wrinkled pinstriped suit, Bascom wrapped his sandwich in its wax paper envelope and put it aside.

"What's on your mind?" he asked coldly.

"Hi, Bob," Thompson said with a broad smile, as if they still were the best of friends. He took a sheet of paper from a folder and handed it to Bascom. "Ad Hoc Committee for Study of ED Care at Whitney Community Hospital," was typed in boldface across its top.

"Three of us will review all of Evans's work for September and October," he explained. "Rutledge asked Davidson to order it."

"Have you talked with anyone else about this?"

"Yeah, and everyone agrees the ED has problems."

"You're just now realizing a well-known fact? Donna tells me horror stories all the time."

Thompson's eyes lit up when he heard Donna's name, then shrugged. His jacket slipped backwards, releasing a nauseating stench of nervous perspiration. "She would know, wouldn't she?" he said as he pulled it back onto his shoulders.

"Well, I gotta get going," he added before retrieving the document and plodding out of the office.

As Thompson disappeared into the hallway, Bascom received a call from the hospital. Bill Shadwell was having difficulty breathing.

"I put him on oxygen and ordered a chest X-ray," the nurse said. "Do you want me to do anything else?"

"No, I'm on my way." He tossed his sandwich in the trash, pocketed his stethoscope, and left for the hospital.

Rose Shadwell was pacing outside her husband's room when he arrived. Her sad eyes described the desperate situation awaiting him, and they entered the room together. A

well-dressed man wearing a turban was standing by Bill's bedside and turned to greet them when he saw them.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Bascom demanded.

"I'm Dr. Sahri, an oncologist from San Francisco. I'm treating Mr. Shadwell's cancer."

"Under whose orders?"

"Dr. Davidson told me to treat his cancer patients when I come down once a week."

"Mr. Shadwell is not Dr. Davidson's patient, he's mine," Bascom fumed.

"Er, well," Sahri stammered.

"You wouldn't be here because you're behind on your alimony payments and need some quick cash, would you?" Bascom demanded, clenching his fists.

"There's no need to be offensive, doctor."

"You have no idea how offensive I can get, Sahri, but you'll find out if you're still in this room thirty seconds from now. And if you ever touch another patient of mine without my permission, or if you dare to send these people a bill, I'll have your license. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said, banging his knee on the bedpost as he scurried sideways from the room to avoid contact with Mrs. Shadwell.

"I'm sorry, Rose," he said with an apologetic smile.

"It's always something, Doc," she agreed, clucking her tongue. "I'm glad you're here to help us."

Bascom went over to Bill who was now totally blind and crippled from a fracture that had sheared through the tumor in his pelvis. He could hear the oxygen hiss into his patient's face mask, and then bubble through his fluid-filled lungs.

"Hello, Bill," he said softly, squeezing his hand.

"Dr. Bascom, I'd like you to meet Bill's mother," Rose

interrupted as an elderly woman entered the room. She was blotting her tears with a yellow handkerchief.

"Hello, Mrs. Shadwell. I'm sorry," he said. She had watched her son grow from an infant dependent on her, to a man of strength, and finally to a corrupt specter. He felt her pain as well as his own, since neither could help her dying son. He explained the uselessness of further therapy, and then left for the radiology department to review Bill's X-ray.

Art Compton, a lead apron covering him from his shoulders to mid-thigh, was exiting a procedure room when he arrived. The elderly radiologist worked mornings in Whitney and afternoons in Phoenix. His deformed, arthritic hands prevented him from performing intricate studies, and he spent his time performing barium enemas, and interpreting routine X-rays and CT scans, when the unit was not down for repairs.

"Hi, Art," Bascom said, "do you have Shadwell's X-ray?"

"It's on the desk," he volunteered. He grimaced, then arched his back to relieve some invisible discomfort. Bascom took the X-ray from a two-foot tall pile and pushed it under the clips of a lighted view box. The black and white film showed a large tumor invading Bill's right lung and ribs, giving the latter a moth-eaten appearance. His left lung showed that his pneumonia was not responding to antibiotic therapy.

"Have you seen Thompson recently?" he asked, returning the X-ray to the pile.

"Yeah," Art nodded. He hung his heavy lead apron on a rack, exchanging it for an old tweed jacket with leather-patched elbows. "He mumbled something about an investigation into the habits of our ED docs," he said, donning the jacket, “but he didn’t ask about them specifically.”

"I've been meaning to talk to you about them."

"Why? You know the problems."

"I've heard rumors. Firsthand information would be better."

"That's from the ED in the past twenty-four hours," he griped, pointing a knobby finger at the pile of films on his desk. "It's three times higher than it ever was in the same time period before they came to town." He clawed through it with his deformed hands and clumsily extracted a stack of films.

"These X-rays are all on one patient," he explained, fumbling them under the clips on the view boxes. "What do you see?"

Bascom's eyes narrowed in concentration. "Nothing abnormal," he said with a shrug after viewing the ten X-rays.

"Right. Now look at this," Compton said, placing another X-ray on the view box. He took a brier pipe from a jacket pocket and tapped its stem against his lower lip.

"The radius and the ulna both have hairline fractures," Bascom said, running a finger along a thin line near the ends of the bones of the forearm.

"Right again," Compton said, pointing to those same lines with the end of his pipe. "This patient complained of arm pain after an automobile accident. Evans told her it was just bruised.

"I called Marty Nevins about the fractures this morning, and he had her return so he could put her arm in a cast."

"Is this an isolated incident?"

"Hell, no!" he frowned, jabbing the stem of the pipe in the direction of the films piled on his desk. "Thanks to Evans, who is the real problem, where I once found six problems in ten X-rays, now I find one in twenty, and it's

usually one he misses. It wastes technology, money, and is malpractice."

"Will you tell the members of the committee that?"

"If they ask me, sure," he nodded energetically.

"Do you know what type of contract he has with the hospital?"

"He gets a big salary plus a share of the income from the tests he orders. The more he runs, the more he earns."

"Thanks, Art," Bascom said before returning to his office.

He was reviewing patient charts late that afternoon when Jonas Price burst into his *Piccola Repubblica*— Little Republic— as he had begun calling his private office. Helen had chided him when he told her about the christening, asking if he intended to design a flag and a coat of arms before stretching barbed wire around the building. He told her it seemed like a good idea.

"Carl's awake!" Jonas exclaimed joyously, with a smile that reached his eyes. "While one of the nurses was leaning over him, he opened his eyes and asked, 'Where am I?' Can you imagine the look on her face?"

Bascom could not, and accompanied Jonas to the hospital. Martha, her face aglow with happiness, was smothering Carl in kisses when they entered his room. He went to the foot of the bed, gently squeezed the boy's toe, and said simply, "Welcome back, Carl."

"Who are you?" the boy asked, cocking his head to the side.

"He's Dr. Bascom, don't you remember him? He saved your life," his mother explained as tears of joy ran down her cheeks.

"Actually I was only one of many who helped you save your own life," he corrected before examining the boy. The

stiffness in Carl's right arm and leg indicated brain damage, and considering the time that had elapsed since the accident, it would be permanent.

"Tomorrow we'll begin some real physical therapy," he said after finishing his examination.

"Will he be as good as he was before the accident?" Martha asked, drying her eyes with a blue and white handkerchief.

"I don't know just yet, but the sooner we start the PT, the sooner he'll get home," he replied.

"That's wonderful news," Martha yelled. She grabbed Bascom and kissed his cheeks.

"Wow. I'm glad I didn't tell you he'd be running track in two days," he laughed. He shook Jonah's hand, said, "see you tomorrow," and left the room, noticing the overflowing garbage can in the corner on his way out.

Some things never change.

He was leaving the building when a nurse called his cell phone to tell him Bill Shadwell had just died. He returned to the man's bedside, and sympathized briefly with Rose and his mother before heading home.

Chapter 23

Joe Thompson arrived unexpectedly in Bascom's office on the chilly December morning that Dr. Davidson had chosen for his ad hoc meeting. Helen made him sit in the empty waiting room for an hour before admitting him to her boss's inner office. As a woman scorned, she enjoyed pecking at the fat man's fragile ego whenever she could.

"I haven't reviewed the charts yet," Joe quickly apologized to the rebel upon entering his sanctum. "But I promise I will."

"Isn't the meeting in an hour?" Bascom asked. He could hear his blood pressure rising as he tried to keep his temper in check. He leaned back and put his feet up on the corner of his desk.

"Yup."

"How many charts are you supposed to review?"

"Seven hundred."

"So you'll review them after the meeting?"

Thompson ran a finger under his tight collar and began to sweat. "No. I'll finish reviewing them before it starts," he said lamely. "John Cody will review the records for November, so we'll evaluate three months of Evans's work.

'We had a meeting the other day, and we all agreed to close him down if we uncover more than simple deviations from proper procedure."

"I can see the halo over your fat head from here," Bas-

com said sarcastically. "Who's John Cody?"

"An obstetrician who transferred to Phoenix a few years ago," he answered with a nervous smile. "He volunteered because he needs referrals. He didn't do well here, and I hear he's not doing any better there."

"So you're going to review seven hundred charts in an hour, and an obstetrician who knows nothing about emergency medicine and can't find his asshole with both hands and a flashlight, is going to report on seven hundred more.

“You're pathetic!" Bascom hollered, pulling his feet of the desk. He leaned forward in his chair and angrily waved a finger at the fat surgeon.

"Get the hell out of my office!"

Thompson turned and ran from the room as quickly as his fat legs would allow. As Bascom watched the obese surgeon bounce off the narrow doorway before disappearing into the hallway, he was certain the committee would whitewash the investigation. He was trying to think of an excuse that Davidson would not consider an excuse for his not attending the meeting, when he remembered something Alexander Pope in 1734 had written in his *An Essay on Man*: “hope springs eternal.” *Sure, Alex, it does. And so does bullshit.*

Twenty minutes later he drove to the hospital and parked in front of its entrance. Its once cracked green stucco was now desert sand tan, and wavy orange tiles covered its roof. “At least Davidson has made one positive contribution to this place,” he murmured, striding up the new flagstone walkway.

At the glass entry he chanced upon a furious Donna Franklin dressed in street clothes.

"Off duty, Di?" he asked. A furrowed brow and pursed lips disfigured her usually radiant face.

"Permanently! Cohen just fired me!" she fumed.

"Why?"

"Davidson found out I was your informant in the ED, and he ordered him to."

"It had to be that bastard Thompson!" he said angrily, smacking his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I unintentionally mentioned something about you keeping me informed about the disasters there, and he reported you to Davidson.

“I'm truly sorry."

"Don't be," she answered, squeezing his arm. "I was quitting anyway. I just wanted the satisfaction of resigning. I start work in the Phoenix University Hospital ED in a few days. My only regret is I'll miss working with you.

“Call me, OK?"

"OK," he replied.

“Promise?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, reaching out to hug her.

She kissed him on the lips, then touched the tip of his nose with a manicured finger before continuing to her car that was parked a short distance down Apache Lane.

Bascom entered the building and was struck by an unusually dense stench of oil of wintergreen. He waved it away as he stopped to speak to Linda Stevens in the doorway of her gutted unit. Workers were installing a new nurses' station.

"Missing it, Linda?" he asked the red-haired pediatrician.

"Simon is redoing the department for me." She blushed, her cheeks turning a deeper crimson than her hair.

"I thought his drunk tank had taken it over."

"He's moved it to another area," she explained vaguely before she turned and walked down the hallway.

Cohen was right when he said he lost money taking care of uninsured, impoverished children. So why did he

reopen the pediatric unit?

Bascom continued on to the radiology department where Art Compton was reviewing a huge pile of X-rays. Instead of his old tweed jacket with its leather-patched elbows, he wore a new pinstriped suit and white shirt. In the middle of his blue tie was a golden "D" adorned with a wreath and crown in Emperor Napoleon style. His shoes where shined and the few hairs left on his scalp he had plastered into a neat row.

"How's business, Art?" he asked, eyeing his tie. *It should have "property of" above the decorative "D"*, he thought.

"Fine," he replied evasively, rubbing his lips with the side of a deformed index finger.

"You know Davidson's committee meets today?"

"Um, yeah, I heard" he said, tapping a knobby knuckle over a white spot in an X-ray. He clucked his tongue with a disapproving 'tsk-tsk'.

"I spoke with Cohen earlier."

"What did you tell him?"

"Evans orders more X-rays than a competent doctor would."

Compton was lying. Bascom could hear the wavering in his voice. *Cospirazione*! He was now certain that Joe, who would not review the charts, Linda, who again had her pediatric unit, and Compton, who was lying about what he told George Cohen, were all part of a conspiracy to get him out of the hospital. He was beginning to hope they would succeed.

"And George said?" He carefully studied the radiologist's face as he asked the question.

"'Thanks,'" Compton said, turning away from his inquisitor. He clumsily pulled the X-rays from the view boxes and added them to the large pile on his cluttered

desk.

“He just said, 'thanks,'" he muttered.

"Did Thompson or any of the others on the committee talk to you?"

"Nope."

"Interesting."

Bascom left for the laboratory. The Suit-Monkey had visited Compton, and he was curious to know what Harrison Volkers would be wearing.

Once a quiet room in the bowels of the hospital, the laboratory was now a beehive of activity. Harried technicians scurried about while Harrison, in his wrinkled lab coat, flashy sport shirt and corduroy pants, peered intently into his microscope. He looked up when Bascom called his name.

"Hi, Bob," he said tiredly. "Welcome to the Whitney Zoo."

"I'll say! I've never seen this place so busy."

"All forty-five beds in the hospital are full, but we're running tests as if we had a hundred. This place must hold the record for the highest percentage of healthy patients and normal tests in the state. What can I do for you?"

"Have any of the ad hoc members talked to you?"

"Only Cohen. I hear Davidson has turned the screws. Either his guys get you out of his hair, or he makes their lives miserable. My friend," he said concernedly, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Get ready for some big-time grief."

"I expected as much," Bascom frowned. He stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the workbench. "I'd like to say I'm used to grief since I've been in a situation like this before, but it's not something I'll ever get used to. It wasn't pleasant then and won't be now."

He left the laboratory and reluctantly walked to the boardroom, certain that Davidson had orchestrated a perfect

opera buffa – comic opera. Only Cohen, if anything remained of the spark of integrity he showed before the meeting with Rutledge, could damage Davidson's hope for a perfect scenario. His co-panelists, however, outnumbered him four to one, and, since they were doctors, if only in name, they would have the final say.

When Bascom entered the boardroom which had been freshly painted and completely redecorated. Ted Steele was sitting at the head of a highly polished oak table reading from a yellow tablet, his lips moving silently from word to word. Joe Thompson and George Cohen, both somber faced and staring soulfully into each others' eyes to avoid Bascom's, sat across from Linda Stevens and John Cody. The allegedly incompetent obstetrician, a wizened male with a frozen smile on his narrow, pale face, batted his eyelashes every few seconds, as if he had just climbed out of a dark cave and was adjusting to the light. Bascom sat next to Linda and took a pencil out of his jacket pocket.

"As you know," Steele said gravely after a brief period of polite but stilted socializing, "Dr. Davidson has asked us to examine Dr. Bascom's allegations of over-utilization of services, physician incompetence, and overcharging in our ED.

"After a very careful and thorough review of Dr. Evans's charts and relative patient billings, I find no truth to any of those charges," he said, brushing an invisible speck of lint off his pinstriped lapel. "In fact," he stated, reading somberly from his pad, "the records from September first to the twentieth are perfectly correct, and the billing is right, with one minor exception."

Bascom's fingers rhythmically tensed and relaxed around his pencil.

"I questioned why Dr. Evans ordered tests for lupus on a man with a rash," Steele said, focusing intently on his yel-

low sheet of paper. "As every medical student knows, lupus never presents as a purplish, itchy rash in the groin of a healthy male athlete. The tests, including X-rays, blood and urine cultures, were all negative. The man, of course, had jock-itch."

Bascom's pencil snapped like the blast of a Derringer, but no one looked in his direction.

"Dr. Stevens," Steele smiled nervously. "Would you present your findings?"

"Just like yours, all these records are fine," she said, patting her pile of charts. "There are no unnecessary studies or overcharging coming from our ED."

"Good," Steele said. "Dr. Thompson?"

Joe tugged at his misshapen right earlobe. "Everything's OK," he said softly.

"Thompson," Bascom grouched, "you −− Nothing. Excuse the interruption."

John Cody's feminine voice cut through the awkward silence. "Everything's OK for November," he volunteered. "Good, incompetent work."

Bascom laughed at Cody's incongruous remark, but said nothing. He could not know if his colleagues' responses were a result of their own incompetence, promises of riches or threats by Davidson, lack of concern about the welfare of their patients, or all three. It made no difference, however, since no excuse could counterbalance their mockery of the profession he held sacred.

He lifted several charts from Linda's pile and as he skimmed them, asked nonchalantly, "Have any of you spoken with Dr. Compton or Dr. Volkers about abuses in their departments?"

"I spoke with Dr. Compton," Cohen answered with utmost seriousness. "He showed me a pile of X-rays Dr. Evans had ordered on a four-year-old boy who had fallen

off his tricycle. He said the boy could move his arm without pain, and that the X-rays were 'just to be sure there was no fracture.'

"Although Dr. Compton stressed that Dr. Evans was just being thorough, he suggested that a simple X-ray of the entire arm, if he thought it necessary, would have saved the family a few bucks, and the child unnecessary radiation. Instead he ordered separate X-rays of the shoulder, humerus, elbow, forearm, wrist, and hand, as well as the same X-rays on the other arm for comparison."

Bascom rubbed a finger back and forth across his lips. "Has anybody else spoken with Dr. Compton?" he asked after thinking about Cohen's comments. As an administrator and not a doctor, Bascom knew he could not have understood the absurdity of his statement, but his interview with Compton demonstrated he had a conscience, something foreign to the staff at his hospital. In the WCH environment, a conscience was a death sentence.

Joe raised an arm. "I spoke with both Art and Harrison," he stressed. "They both told me everything is fine."

Lies have short legs, Bascom thought as he listened to the fat man fabricate his answer, and *pance enormi* – huge bellies.

He angrily rapped his knuckles on the table. "You people are full of crap," he exclaimed, as he briefly fixed each of his colleagues in a withering glance. "Excluding George, none of you spoke with anybody other than the pinstriped dwarf from San Francisco who gives you your marching orders.

“My dear pseudo-illustrious colleagues, these four charts," he made a show of counting them, "were on top of Linda's pile, which you just heard her say are flawless. The first," he slid it across the table to Cohen, "belongs to a woman with cystitis. For those of you who don't understand

medical terminology, it means it burns when she pees, and she pees all the time. Evans X-rayed her spine but didn't order a urine analysis or prescribe medication. She left poorer, but with the same disease she came in with.

"This," he said, tossing it after the first, "is a five-year-old boy with pinworms which his mother saw squiggling in his stool. Evans ordered a chest X-ray and a blood panel, but never checked his stool and never killed the worms.

"Next, revered colleagues," he said, his voice rising angrily, "is a patient who got a skull X-ray for his nose injury. I'm sure you paradigms of the profession know you can't diagnose a broken nose on a skull X-ray because the techniques are too different. If this patient did have a fracture, he never learned about it from this hospital since the discharge note said, ‘no fracture’. Moreover, he was exposed to unnecessary radiation, and charged more than he would have been had Evans correctly evaluated his injury.

"This last one belongs to a fifteen-year-old girl who was upset because a dirty old man made an indecent proposal to her. She got a chest X-ray and an electrocardiogram." He tossed the last two charts across the table to join their comrades in a haphazard pile and then slowly scrutinized his colleagues. Each avoided his harsh gaze, preferring to examine an invisible artifact on the table in front of him.

"Four patients, four cases of malpractice. Evans is batting a hundred percent, but I don't envy his record," he concluded. "Covering up his incompetence is terrible dues to pay for membership in Davidson's club."

Bascom quickly rose from the table, his chair crashing backwards to the floor behind him.

"As far as I'm concerned, this farce is adjourned," he scolded before leaving the room and slamming the door behind him.

Once in the hallway he thought, *Compton! Is he or is Cohen lying about Evans?* He raced to radiology department, but Art was no longer there.

"When did he leave?" Bascom asked the technician who was trying to squeeze X-rays into an overloaded filing cabinet.

"Right after you did this morning. He never said why," the genial youth said, stepping down from his kick stool.

Bascom leaned against a desk. "Have you noticed an increase in X-rays since the new ED doctors arrived?"

"Sure," the lad answered, nodding energetically. "They X-ray everything, especially Evans. I used to get time and a half to sleep before they came along. Now, I'm up all night. They're almost all normal, but it wouldn't make any difference if they weren't," he sniggered. "Evans couldn't find a fracture on an X-ray if there was an arrow pointing to it. We have to recall most of his patients because his readings are wrong."

"Could you pull his X-rays from September 1 to November 30 for me?"

"It'll be a *huge* pile. Do you think you can stop him?"

"Probably not, but it's worth a try. Call me at home when they're ready."

"OK, Doc. But don't quit fighting. Evans and Davidson might not like you, but all us techs do. No one is respected more in this place than you."

"I doubt Davidson would agree with that statement, but thanks," he said. "Oh, by the way, is there any politicking between Dr. Compton and Davidson?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'politicking', but his group is renegotiating its contract with the hospital."

Chapter 24

The corrupt but not incompetent ad hoc committee had adjudicated Evans and Davidson innocent of over use and of over pricing laboratory studies, but Bascom knew they were not. Since his colleagues had deliberately covered up a situation that directly harmed the citizens of Whitney, he realized he could no longer rely on them to help him correct the hospital's myriad problems. Even so, he remained optimistic that after his own review of the X-rays, and with the help of a few governmental watchdogs and insurance companies, he could stop the abuses.

When he answered his telephone the night after the meeting, he hoped it was the technician telling him that Evans's films, in a pile that almost reached the ceiling, were waiting for him to review.

"Bascom here," he said excitedly.

"I can't get your X-rays," the technician said immediately.

"Why not?"

"You get them, I get fired."

"Who threatened you?"

"I can't help you," he said simply before hanging up.

Bascom slammed his receiver in its cradle and went into his kitchen. He rinsed a glass from a sink of dirty dishes, filled it with Scotch, and went into his living room. He lit the mesquite logs in his river rock fireplace and then

plopped on the couch and put his feet on the coffee table.

The Hippocratic Oath has become an ignoble protectionist treaty, he thought as he sipped his drink and watched yellow and orange flames prance excitedly over the burning logs.

He closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of the couch. The warmth of the fire and the euphoric effect of the alcohol united to pry open the rusty gates to his childhood memories. He saw himself seated at a table in his high school library, a pimply-faced, rumpled hair teenager poring over Jim Flexner's, *Doctors on Horseback.*

Were the glowing tales about Benjamin Rush, William Beaumont, and Crawford W. Long all lies?

He had not believed so when he had read the book decades earlier. In fact he was so impressed by his heroes' devotion to medicine, he had vowed to emulate their standards of excellence. Now, in an attempt to take a step towards that goal by simply asking his colleagues to treat patients competently, respectfully, and honestly, he had found himself derided like a leper in a beauty pageant.

Bascom sorrowfully realized his reading and his Jesuit education, once a source of pride but now one of regret, had not prepared him for the realities of this world, and his last fear, before the glass fell from his hand and he lapsed into a tormented asleep, was that Dr. Davidson's pinstriped crows were going to peck him to death.

He knew he could not stop them.

The next morning Bascom transferred Carl Price to a newly arrived physician in town. Since he had decided to resign from the staff, he could no longer care for the boy in the hospital. Martha adamantly disagreed with his decision, and promised to have Jonas stop by his office later that day to convince him to change his mind.

He was commenting on the ad hoc cover-up in censurable Italian phrases as he passed Helen's office ten minutes later. She brought him hot coffee in his favorite cup decorated with Christmas scenes and, sensing his ill humor, put it on his desk and quietly returned to her office.

As he sipped the fragrant brew, he penned a letter, scanned it for errors, and then called Helen into his office.

"Please type this up for me," he said, handing her the scrap of paper.

She stared at it for a moment before turning it upside down and then sideways. "What language is this?" she grinned, scratching her head.

"Very funny," he said. "It says, 'Dear Doctor Davidson: From this date, December 5, I am resigning from WCH because of ethical concerns. I trust you will notify the appropriate departments. Sincerely, blah, blah, blah.' It must go out today."

"Please don't do this, Dr. Blah," she pleaded, shaking her head. "You'll need to repay everything the hospital has advanced you so far, and you'll cut off your referrals. We'll starve. It happened to Ben, but since he was the best doctor in town, he survived."

"You mean I'm not the best?" Bascom asked with feigned indignation.

"Most patients think you are, but even more judge their doctors by the smoke they blow up… somewhere. It's not a talent in which you excel," she said. The weak smile in her troubled face did not mask her apprehension.

"Dear boss, until you give them what *they* want and not what *you* know they need, they'll never appreciate you. Besides, Ben was a multimillionaire and didn't need the money from his practice. You do."

"So they screwed Ben, eh? Donna told me he lopped off heads with impunity." A void surrounded by wiggly

lines appeared in his field of vision, and Helen became a headless old mannequin. Another migraine was beginning. He had suffered from them on rare occasions since he was a teenager, but now that his life had become more complicated and stressful, they seemed to be recurring on an almost weekly basis.

"Donna wasn't here to see what was going on. I was, and it was horrible," she said. The corners of her mouth turned slightly downwards, and she was lost in her thoughts for a minute.

"When Ben reported Grimes to the medical society because of the hysterectomies he was performing on teens, all the other docs, with their dirty little consciences, thought their necks would be next on the chopping block.

"They united and tore him apart in the press and in their offices. Gently of course, to avoid lawsuits. None of their accusations or slurs were true, but they raised doubts in the minds of the townspeople, and doubt was enough to convince them that Ben was an ogre. Most of his patients transferred to other doctors within days of the press releases, and their exodus almost put him out of business."

She rubbed the small cross hanging on a fine gold chain around her neck and sighed deeply. "Even though we rarely spoke at the time, I pleaded with Thompson to help Ben," she said. "A word from him would have gone a long way. He laughed in my face, that fat bas.... Anyway he said he didn't want to lose referrals because he backed a loser, and just stood by, pulled on his damn earlobe, and watched Ben get dragged over the coals.

"Ben was the best doc this town had ever had until you came along. He practiced out of passion, not profit, as you do. And he was too much of an idealist, too naïve to understand how fickle people can be, exactly like you. When the situation had worsened to the point where he was seeing

only a couple of patients a day, he started drinking heavily, which I pray you don't do," she said, glancing sideways at his face to see his response.

Bascom ignored the insinuation and massaged his temples, just as he had always done at the onset of a migraine. It never relieved the throbbing pain, and he wondered why he bothered.

"Adding that to his depression following his son's death, we thought he might commit suicide," Helen continued. "He was in a very dark place. Thank god for Evelyn. Had she not been there for him, he probably would have."

After a moment of unpleasant memories, she shook her head and held up Bascom's note to the light. "Are you sure this is in English?" she asked.

Bascom looked to the door of his office. The hole in his vision hid it from view, *scotoma scintillante* the Italians call it, but it let him see Helen from the corner of his eye.

"Squirting lemon juice on it won't work either," he grimaced. "Ben told me about Grimes's involvement in his son's death, and Thompson told me about the unnecessary hysterectomies Grimes performed on teens. It's no wonder those two don't get along."

"They hate each other with a passion. The hospital took Grimes's side in the investigation," she said, folding the paper and putting it in her pocket. "It would have cut its own financial throat had it not. After a ten minute investigation, they turned up one case where they thought surgery might have been unnecessary, but decided that even though the teenager had lost her ovaries and uterus, she hadn't been harmed. They dropped the investigation, and Ben lost his battle.

"Grimes never forgave Ben for interfering in his livelihood, and he tried to get Evelyn fired, since she was the one who told him about the hysterectomies."

And so history repeats itself. Cohen had fired Donna for telling me about Evans.

"While growing up, I thought medicine was a noble profession. It was always my dream to become a useful part of it," Bascom lamented, "but, boy was I wrong! Anyway, referrals from our patients will keep us alive."

"Don't count on it," she said, raising her voice and shaking a finger at Bascom, a frustrated mother correcting her obstinate son. She was losing patience listening to him defend what he thought was his altruistic behavior, but which was, in reality, naivety.

"You'll find out what this town is like when Davidson lambastes you in the newspapers about the all money you owe him."

"I already know what this town is like," Bascom said, "but Rutledge and I agreed I'd resign if I didn't like the committee's report, and that's what I'm doing. I won't have to repay a dime." *I would feel better about that agreement if my tape recorder hadn't died.*

"Dream on," Helen chided. "When are you going to start listening to reason?"

"Boy, I thought my mother was tough," he replied, "but compared to you she was a pussy cat." He rubbed his chin between his fingers, feeling the stubble he missed while shaving that morning. "Be sure to post copies of that letter around the office."

"Is that really necessary?" she asked in a still angry but more subdued tone.

"Yes, Miss Hyde," Bascom answered. "Now you can go back to being Secretary Jekyll. And have Phoenix U send us the forms to apply for hospital privileges. We'll admit our patients there."

"Right, Boss."

"Where is Fran today?"

"She's always late after Tuesday nights."

"Last night was Thursday."

"Not for her. It was a running joke that she always had sex with her husband on Tuesdays. They're divorced now, but he still stops over to her place to revive his spirit. She calls those days 'Tuesdays.' I don't know what they do, but she's always exhausted the next day," Helen explained before returning to her office.

That evening, after the last patient and his staff had left the building, Bascom phoned Donna. Her phone rang a long time before she answered it and yelled, "Don't hang up! I'll be right back!"

He listened to blaring strains of Coltrane's "Giant Steps" before she came back on the line.

"Sorry," she said. "I was in the shower. Who is this?"

"Bascom."

"Robby! Hi! What's up?"

"I wanted to apologize again for getting you fired."

"Don't let it worry you. How are you?"

"I quit today," he said. He leaned back and put his feet up on the desk.

"You did what?" she asked in disbelief.

"I quit. The committee's investigation was a whitewash, so I quit."

"You shouldn't have," she replied, chastising him.

"Why not?"

"Because instead of disarming the bandits, you'll now be ducking their bullets. And you'll never know when or from which direction they'll arrive. Had you stayed on staff, you could have at least kept an eye on them."

As Evelyn told me Ben had done. "I never thought of it that way, Donna," he said, scratching his head. "But it's too late now."

"I can't blame you though," she agreed. "You must know that Evans and his buddies are stealing your patients. Before they leave the ED, they give them a list of the providers in town, one you're not on, and, after trashing you should the patients mention your name, insist they go to one of them for follow-up. I tried to redirect a few, but Evans caught me. I guess that's one of the reasons they fired me."

"And we know Thompson is another one," he said.

"Sure. They have a knack for firing competent employees and keeping the trash. Be careful, Robby. They're a mean bunch," Donna warned.

"How about a home cooked meal and a shoulder to cry on. I learned to boil water at an early age and can make a pot of it at a moment's notice. It's good for cooking hot dogs or delivering babies."

Bascom laughed. "I'm not interested in either, but I can make tortellini. How about Saturday night?"

"I'll be waiting."

Bascom was locking up his office minutes later when Jonas Price tapped him on the shoulder. "Martha told me you've transferred Carl to another doctor," he rued. "You can't. I won't let anybody touch my boy without your supervision."

"His physical therapy has been going well. He'll do fine without me," he reassured the anxious father while putting his door key in his pocket. "Dr. Kuhn will do a good job caring for him. But if my help means that much to you, take Carl home. I'll stop by your place every day until I'm satisfied that I'm not needed any longer."

"We'll always need you. Tell me what do I have to do."

"Sign him out of the hospital and I'll make the arrangements for outpatient therapy."

"Whew!” Jonas said, pretending to rub sweat off his brow, “I feel much better now. How do I do that?"

"Ask the nurse to do it. She'll try to scare you with a list of things that'll happen to Carl the minute you take him home, but he'll be fine, I promise you. If they give you a hard time, let me know," Bascom grinned. "Then I'll have one final talk with Davidson."

"I think I can handle it," Jonas laughed.

"Good," he said. He pulled on the door to make sure it was locked before adding, "let's go home. I have some running to do."

Chapter 25

Over the next two months, newlyweds Benjamin and Evelyn Wiggins drove more than ten thousand miles in her new Lexus, visiting parks and museums, eating in fine restaurants, and sleeping in the best hotels from Phoenix to Anchorage. They drove on highways, where irate drivers cursed Ben for driving fifteen miles under the speed limit in the left lane, and on back roads, where theirs would be the only car for hours at a time. They crossed mountains and rivers, walked on spectacular glaciers in Alaska and British Columbia, and waved to the black and brown bears, moose, bison, and caribou grazing along the roads, wildlife they had never seen outside the Phoenix Zoo.

It was fortuitous that they had seen so little snow by the time they crossed back into the United States at the end of December. But for all their good luck, there was one piece of bad luck. Evelyn now walked more slowly and awkwardly than ever before, and often had stumbled on the uneven trails at rest stops where they relaxed before resuming their trip.

Her speech had also changed. Where it was once light and lyrical, it was now slightly nasal and occasionally slurred. Ben was frantic. He had tried to ignore his wife's symptoms, jokingly calling her "clumsy doll," or "Mrs. Kissinger," when her voice deepened. He was sure he knew the cause of her symptoms, but preferred to deny naming it.

To do so would have meant pronouncing a death sentence on the love of his life, the woman who had led him out of the darkest period of his existence. Besides, he thought, or he hoped, he could be wrong.

"Ev," he said casually as they drove through Yellowstone Park on their return to Whitney, "I'm sure there's nothing seriously wrong with you, but would you like to talk to Dr. Bascom about your stumbling?" He had overheard them talking about it at the wedding, and he knew the young doctor would know if her health had changed since their last meeting. He was also the only doctor in town he respected enough to let examine his wife.

"Maybe I should, Ben," she replied. "I like him. Yes," she added after a moment, "I will see him. Will you make an appointment for me?"

"As soon as we're back in town, my love," he agreed without hesitation.

Meteorologists were reporting a January blizzard in New York, but in the Arizona desert, where a sweatshirt and shorts were all Bascom wore to keep warm, birds chirped in the budding mesquite trees and flowers bloomed. Neither fauna, flora, nor Bascom suspected the worst was yet to come.

A month had passed since his resignation from the hospital, and although Cohen had not demanded repayment of what he had paid him to leave his heavenly mountaintop for the infernal desert, his colleagues were busy stealing his patients, as Ben had predicted, and as Donna had confirmed.

His income, never spectacular even when his office teemed with patients, was falling precipitously, and he was having trouble paying his bills. Despite the financial crisis, of which Helen irritatingly reminded him several times a day, he remained stubbornly optimistic, Helen said “delu-

sional," that his patients would return to him when they understood what he was doing for them.

He was walking to his office on that balmy January morning when he saw Linda Stevens and Marty Nevins walking towards him. The pinstriped surgeon opened his mouth as if to speak, but Linda pulled him into the street before he could utter a word. They darted across the road, forcing a pick-up truck to swerve to avoid them, and continued on their way without looking back.

Bascom watched them turn up the path to the hospital, and shrugged. He was learning more and more about human nature, but liking it less and less. As he continued his brisk walk to his office, he recalled the tragic story of Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian obstetrician teaching in the Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna in 1847. Childbed fever was killing an alarming number of women giving birth in his hospital, and after careful investigation, he had discovered that his students were performing autopsies and then delivering babies without washing their hands. He had them rinse them in chloride of lime after they left the cadavers, and the mortality rate dropped from eleven to one percent.

Semmelweis had described his findings in his book, *The Etiology, the Concept, and the Prophylaxis of Childbed Fever*, a copy of which Bascom kept in the library in his baita, alongside other leather-bound tomes written by early pioneers in medicine. Unfortunately, and foolishly, the obstetrician had launched a scathing attack against leading doctors who had disagreed with his findings. They had considered his affront to their unscientific posturing unpardonable, and their united condemnation of his work had resulted in his breakdown and death in a mental institution.

To his chagrin, Bascom had learned that the medical

community had not improved its behavior in the intervening years, and it would still eagerly destroy any member who disparaged its invented reputation or decreased its inflated income. He knew he was number one in the Whitney edition of that infamous list.

Later that morning, Ben accompanied Evelyn into Bascom's office. Leaning heavily on his arm for support, she stubbed the toe of a shoe on the threshold of the building and would have fallen if Ben had not held her until she regained her balance.

The waiting room was tidy but empty, which Ben thought was unusual for a doctor of Bascom's caliber. He helped Evelyn to a chair, even though she insisted she could manage by herself.

"Yes, dear," he said with false deference after she was seated. "I'll talk with Helen and be right back."

He limped to the secretary's desk and tapped on her counter. "We're here," he announced.

"Oh, Ben, hi. Sorry I didn't hear you come in," the gray-haired woman said with a warm smile. "Darn allergies have plugged up my ears again. Dr. Bascom is on the phone. He'll be with you in a moment."

"No rush," he said, scanning the messages on the bulletin board by her window.

"What's this all about?" he asked as he read the notice.

> Dear Doctor Davidson:
>
> As of this date, December 5, I am resigning from WCH because of ethical concerns. I trust you will notify the appropriate departments.
>
> Sincerely,

"Has Robert really resigned from the hospital?"

"Yes," Helen replied, shaking her head. "It was foolish and had predictable results, as you can see from our empty waiting room. I told him this would happen, but he wouldn't listen. We're seeing thirty percent fewer patients every day."

"Why did he quit?"

"Dr. Bascom had a run in with some guy Davidson appointed to set up a committee to examine the problems at the hospital. He didn't like the results, so he quit."

"Was Thompson on the committee?"

"Yes, that fat bastard was," she scowled.

"That figures. He's completely untrustworthy. Bob should never have resigned, no matter how bad the situation," Ben said. "Now he'll need to repay everything Cohen advanced him, and the docs will cut off his referrals."

"I already told him that. He's thick-headed like you, Ben Wiggins," Helen said sternly. "He believes in justice and has your strong code of ethics, but he lives in a world so remote from reality, I sometimes think he still believes in the tooth fairy."

Ben laughed. "Santa is more generous."

"Maybe. Let's put Ev in a room so she'll be ready when he gets off the phone."

Helen showed them into an examining room and helped Evelyn change into a yellow paper gown before returning to her desk.

When Bascom entered her room moments later, the unsmiling nurse, with downcast eyes and interlocked fingers on her lap, was sitting primly on the edge of the examination table. Ben, pale and quiet, with his hand shaking noticeably on Evelyn's shoulder, was like a forlorn child ask-

ing his father if he could save his pet gerbil an automobile had just run over.

"Well, dear friends," he inquired gaily in an attempt to lighten the oppressive atmosphere, "what brings you in today?"

"There's something wrong with Ev," Ben said mournfully. "She isn't as lively as usual."

Bascom pulled his chair from under his desk and straddled it in front of his patient. "What's wrong, Ev?" he asked.

"My muscles ache and I've lost ten pounds since the wedding," she said softly. Her normally bright eyes were dull and vacant. "Walking is a chore, and I can't drive my new car because I don't have the strength to push the pedals."

Bascom asked her several questions and then examined her. The woman's general examination was normal, but the wasting of her leg muscles, not present at the time of his first examination, alarmed him. He helped her from the table and asked her to stand on her toes. Despite her best effort, she could not lift her heel more than a fraction of an inch from the floor before falling back against the table. After her third failed attempt, the two men lifted her back onto it.

After she had settled down, Bascom opened a safety pin and gently touched its point to her ankle.

"Ouch," Evelyn said, pulling away.

"Sorry," he apologized before returning to his desk, chair in hand, to jot notes on her chart. "I'm finished tormenting you."

"Well, what do you think? Is it serious?" Wiggins asked, wringing his knobby hands. His face was furrowed with worry.

"It's too early to be certain, Ben," Bascom replied,

looking over to his friends. "Minor diseases sometimes mimic major ones. Suppose we check for them before we jump to worrisome conclusions?"

"So you don't think it's serious?" Evelyn asked, forcing a smile. She tightened the belt of her gown around her thin waist.

"Maybe not," he answered evasively. But he already knew it was. Ben eyed him suspiciously.

"Botsum's right, we'll run a few lab tests," Wiggins said. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. "You'll be fine, honey, and the tests will prove it."

Bascom suspected the old physician knew the diagnosis and was simply bolstering his wife's spirits, but he could not be certain. The possibility of a remission of her illness existed, and he preferred to wait to see if Evelyn's symptoms worsened before naming her disease.

He drew her blood, told her he would contact her with the results, and excused himself so she could dress.

As he exited the room, Helen was in the hallway, holding a stack of hospital bills she had collected from disgruntled patients.

"More unwanted information?" he asked, taking them and fanning through them like a deck of cards.

"I'm only the messenger, but since you've got an hour before your next patient, I thought you might like some interesting reading," she replied with a sinister grin.

He took the bills into his office, quickly skimmed through them, and decided the time had come to warn the townspeople that a trip to the hospital for anything except a life-threatening emergency was foolhardy.

When Ben and Evelyn left the examining room, they heard Bascom pounding unevenly on his typewriter.

"What's he doing in there," Ben asked Helen when he stopped at her desk to pay the bill.

"Writing a newspaper article warning people about Davidson's price hikes."

"Good luck to him," he answered. "How much do we owe?"

"Nothing," she replied, putting Evelyn's chart into the filing cabinet behind her desk.

"Nothing? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said. "He doesn't charge doctors and their families."

"Noble gesture, old school. Thanks," Ben said before he and Evelyn left the office.

Bascom finished typing his article and had Helen mail copies of it to the Phoenix *Globe*, to the Governor, to the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System, AHCCCS, to the Arizona Medical Association, and to Medicare fraud investigators.

Chapter 26

"I can't do this, Donna, believe me."

"Sure you can, Robby, I know you can," she insisted. "Once you're in the saddle, it'll come back to you."

"I told you I rode once," he protested, "and I almost broke my fool neck."

"Big baby," she taunted. "Remember when I said you'd have better luck if we rode together."

"No."

"It was at my house."

"The first night at your house? I remember being in the saddle that night," Bascom said wryly, "but horses had nothing to do with it."

"I hope you last longer this time," she laughed before humming the theme from *High Noon*.

The SUV shook and rattled as it traveled over the washboard desert road leading to a small ranch a few miles south of Whitney. When they arrived, an old cowboy with a large gut overhanging his belt and bowed legs was standing in front of his trailer home. He waved as they pulled up in a cloud of dust.

"Ready?" Donna asked.

"Ready as I'll never be," Bascom responded anxiously.

"Let's go then," she ordered. They exited the SUV and Donna ran to the cowboy and gave him a hug.

"Welcome back, kiddo," he replied in a Texas drawl.

"It's been a while."

"I've been busy," she agreed as Bascom walked up to them.

"Nat," she said, "this is Dr. Bascom. He wants to ride Tuffy."

The cowboy studied Bascom's sport jacket and penny loafers while rubbing a gnarled finger over his chapped lips. "'City slicker' don't come close to describin' you, feller," he said. "I ain't sure Tuffy is tame 'nuff for you."

"He's been on a horse before, he just dresses funny," Donna assured him.

"OK," he said reluctantly, tilting his worn Stetson hat over his eyes so he could scratch a spot behind an ear. "An ambulance can get here in 'bout ten minutes," he added with a snicker.

He led them to a corral where a bay horse was standing calmly by the rail watching them as they approached. A huge palomino stallion was chewing hay in its center. The gelding whinnied as Donna wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed the white star on his forehead. He rested his head on her shoulder until she broke away.

"This is Killer, Robby," she said. "His name makes him sound like he's a bad guy, but he's gentle as a lamb. He used to be a racehorse. Tuffy, on the other hand," she said, pointing to the palomino, "used to work rodeos until he got too old. The cowboys that unsuccessfully tried to ride him were not unhappy to see him retire. He's real calm now, and just eats Nat out of house and home."

The horse looked up when he heard his name, snorted, and returned to his lunch.

"Did you see the terror in his eyes," Bascom said. "Listen, I hear his knees knocking."

"Those are your knees, Robby," Donna laughed. She entered the corral, slipped a halter over Tuffy's head, and

led him to the hitching rail.

"See how gentle he is," she said, patting the beast's massive neck.

"With those huge feet he'd make a perfect tractor for a Tibetan farmer."

“Hooves, Doc, they’re hooves, not feet,” Nat chastised gently as he tossed a saddle onto the palomino. He cinched it up and slipped a halter over his head, which he held while Bascom jammed a loafer into a stirrup.

After he tried unsuccessfully three times to mount the gigantic horse, Nat whispered, "t'other side, Doc."

"I was just checking to see if you were alert," he said with a laugh. He passed widely behind the animal and mounted from the other side as Donna tittered like a schoolgirl.

After Nat turned him loose, Bascom pulled hard on Tuffy's reins and kicked him in the flanks.

"OK, Thunderbolt," he commanded, "mush!"

"The brakes or the gas, Doc," Nat suggested with a laugh. "Not both."

Bascom released the reins and kicked Tuffy hard in the flanks. This time the horse snorted and grudgingly walked over to Killer.

The small screen heroes of the past rode smooth as silk in their saddles, but Bascom, despite his determination, bounced on his as Tuffy trotted behind Donna and Killer to Frazier Wash. A dense chaparral of false lilac and manzanita trees, whose frosted gray green leaves seemed spray painted on tight-barked purplish stems, lined its sandy banks. A flock of vultures, rising from a hidden lunch, circled overhead.

"I love this area, Robby. It always makes me want to canoodle after a hard ride."

"Just the thought is stimulating," he said, "I mean the

canoodling. This horse doesn't lope."

"Oh yes he does," she insisted. She tossed a leg over her saddle, slid to the ground, and walked over to Tuffy. With her back to Bascom, she pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and held it to the rebel's roving eye, moving an index finger sternly from the paper to his nose.

"Capito?" she asked firmly. Tuffy whinnied.

"He'll lope now," Donna said with an air of mystery. She mounted Killer and yelled, "*Go*!"

Killer flew down the wash as Tuffy reared up, flashed his silver hooves in the air, and took up the challenge. Bascom hung desperately onto the saddle horn, while one foot frantically searched for a stirrup.

Tuffy thundered past Donna as Bascom pulled himself upright in the saddle. The steed roared down the wash, sand and rock flying from his hooves, for half a mile before slowing to a walk. Sweat foamed on his massive neck and chest when Donna caught up with them moments later.

"I told you he'd lope," she crowed.

"Damnation!" Robert exclaimed. "What did you show him?"

She pulled a wrinkled photo from her pocket. "This," she grinned, handing him a picture of a hamburger.

Chapter 27

The inhabitants of the small desert town on Route 85 to Mexico responded with mixed reaction to Bascom's exposé of the inner workings of their local hospital in the Phoenix *Globe*. His patients loved it, and many called his office to tell him so. Davidson and Cohen were less enthusiastic, and would soon have their intermediary tell him how much they disapproved of his literary skills.

A few weeks after his article appeared in the press, a certified letter arrived at the post office. Bascom waited on a long line in the stifling hot room until a sweaty clerk had him sign a receipt before handing him the letter. He had hoped it held a check for his back rent.

He exited the post office banging the long envelope on the palm of his hand as he walked to the curb. He sat on a wooden bench, tore open an end, and pulled out the letter it contained:

> Dear Doctor Bascom: (he read)
>
> Whitney Community Hospital has referred your recent request for what you consider “back rent” to this office for reply. Rather than the Hospital being indebted to you for your alleged rent, because of your resignation from the medical staff, among other matters, you are now obligated

to repay all funds previously advanced to you under your agreement with the Hospital.

Said amount of $98,975.20 is now due and payable in full.

We hope to settle this matter amicably, and that you and the Administration can agree on payment terms for the amount you owe, without further involvement of our office.

Sincerely,
William North, Atty.

Bascom crumpled the letter in his fist. *So this is the way we tear up our agreement and go our separate ways, eh, Rutledge?* But he knew he had brought Davidson's wrath upon himself. His lawyer's letter was not a response to his request for back rent. It was a reprimand for his exposé in the *Globe*.

He and Rutledge had agreed he would leave the hospital if Davidson refused to correct what he considered unethical behavior by some of WCH’s staff. As part of the bargain he had agreed to stop harassing Davidson. He had broken that promise by writing his exposé.

North's demand letter was the San Franciscan's first step before filing a lawsuit against him, and it was exactly what Ben Wiggins had predicted he would do.

He drove home, penciled a response to North on a scrap of paper on his butcher-block kitchen table, and then went to the bathroom to wash up. As he listened to the water gurgle around the drain on its way to who knew where, he studied his face in the mirror. His unkempt, shoulder length, gray-blond hair framed a furrowed brow. Crow’s feet, not due to laughter, had formed at the edges of tired eyes sunk in black circles. His emotional toil had made him

old before his time.

Walk away from this suicide mission before you end up like Semmelweis, chained to a wall and beaten to death by guards you pissed off.

As he stuck his head under the faucet and poured a pine-scented shampoo onto his hair, he remembered a line from Robert Frost's famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*: "I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference."

Bascom now understood why his road was less traveled. Only a madman would walk down a lonely lane, narrowly avoiding the slings and arrows of his colleagues, with a sign pinned to his back that said: "ostracized," "pariah," or "recluse."

He remembered the first sign pinned on him when he and Lance had unionized the house staff in their small hospital years ago. It was unheard of at the time, since doctors never struck, even if it were to force hospitals to improve the way they treated their patients.

His colleagues had derogatorily called him, "DQS – Don Quixote in Scrubs." He felt it a fitting epitaph for his tombstone. The insult then was against his integrity, and he bore it with equanimity. In his present situation, he would add to that the worst title he could imagine: bankrupt loser.

You are right. Taking the road less traveled has made all the difference, Mr. Frost, but it's not the difference I'd hoped for. Now please tell me how to get off it.

That night the Wiggins invited Donna to dinner in their Santa Fe home. Ben had prepared Evelyn's favorite Mexican meal, pollo oaxaca.

While seated at the hand-carved kitchen table, Donna, beautiful as ever, animatedly described her new job as head nurse in Phoenix University Hospital's emergency depart-

ment.

"But I don't understand," Ben interrupted, scratching his wig. The talcum powder on it rose in small puffs before settling down. "Did you quit or did they fire you?"

"I was getting ready to quit, but Cohen fired me before I could," she groused.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Dr. Bascom thinks it might have been because someone told Cohen I was his informant about the shenanigans in the ED. Also Evans caught me trying to convince a patient to return to Robby for follow-up, and not to go to Grimes, as he was suggesting."

"Fat Thompson had to be that someone," he mumbled. "Only a seedy bastard like him would do that."

"That's what Robby thought also. It turned out for the best, kinda. I love Phoenix and the hospital, but I miss him. He's great to work with."

"Are you two an item?" Evelyn asked slowly and with a slightly nasal tone. She was thinner and paler than Donna had remembered from their last visit, and showed little of the boundless energy she once had.

"We see each other occasionally, but I wouldn't say we're an item. He's made it clear to me that his patients and his fight against Davidson come before me."

"He didn't he actually say that, did he?" Ben asked, arching an eyebrow in surprise.

"No, but 'actions speak louder than words,' as they say."

Evelyn patted Donna's hand. "I know how that is," she agreed. Ben was aghast at the thought. He dropped his fork and gently shook his wife's forearm to get her attention.

"Was I like that?" he asked. *Please say no.*

"Sometimes you were," she replied gently, looking over at him. "But since Dr. Bascom is so like you, I'm

pretty sure he decided long ago to dedicate his life first and foremost to treating and protecting the ill.

"He's not putting you after everything and everybody, Donna," she explained, returning to her guest. "He knows you're healthy, independent, and strong-willed, and presumes you don't need him to oversee everything you do. But he'll be there for you when you do need him. Unfortunately, he doesn't realize you're a woman whose emotional side needs nurturing."

"Was I really like that, Ev?" Ben repeated. His lower lip quivered. He caressed her cheek with the back of his shaky, gnarled hand. Evelyn tilted her head and lifted her shoulder, enveloping it in a living glove.

"Of course you were, dear," she replied, taking his hand and squeezing it between hers. "But I knew what you stood for the first time you took care of me in your office forty years ago. It was difficult and disappointing to have to cancel dates and vacations because you had a sick patient to care for, or because your colleagues were dragging you over the coals and you had to do battle.

"But I loved you dearly, and I knew that someday you would be all mine. And now you are!"

She squeezed his hand again before Ben took it away.

"I'm so very sorry," he said, as tears appeared in his gray eyes. "I never realized…. I just, I thought…. I'm just so sorry. I must have been a terrible boor."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, my love. You're still the greatest person I have ever met, and I'm happy to be your wife."

A moment of silence followed before Evelyn picked up her fork, lifted a tiny piece of chicken on its tines, and then replaced it on her dish without tasting it.

"You need to eat, honey, please," Ben begged, wiping the tears from his cheeks. "Would you like me to make you

something else?"

"No thanks," she replied, her nasal voice deepening. "I'm not hungry tonight. Would you excuse me? I'm tired and would like to lie down."

"Let me help you," Ben said, jumping up from his chair.

"Maybe I should go," Donna said as she stood from the table.

"No, please don't," Ben protested. "Finish your dinner. I'll only be a minute."

Donna returned to her seat as Ben helped Evelyn stand. "I'm sorry I'm not much of a hostess anymore, Donna," she apologized before leaving for the bedroom. "Please forgive me."

"Get well soon, Evelyn. If I can help, call me."

"I will," she responded weakly.

Ten minutes later Ben returned to the table, his eyes red-rimmed and his shoulders hunched.

"I don't know what to do, Donna," he said. "She has her good days, but they're becoming rarer. She won't eat, and sometimes doesn't even have the strength to get out of bed."

"Do you know what's wrong with her?" she asked.

"Yes, I mean no, no I don't. I mean I don't want to know. I'm leaving all the decisions to Bascom. I, I just can't––" Ben put his head on his arms and cried.

Donna rested a hand on his shaking shoulders. "Don't give up, Dr. Wiggins," she said softly. "If anyone can save Ev, Robby can. And if I can help, you won't need to ask me twice."

Evelyn returned to Dr. Bascom's office in a wheelchair the next day. Ben had bought it for her when his worsening arthritis had made it difficult for him to help her get around

their spacious home. She rarely used it, however, preferring to spend her time in her leather chair in the study, reading or watching water cascade off the rocks into the pool in their manicured backyard.

As soon as he had brought the conveyance into the house, he upgraded it from a dull, black, boring, vinyl chair on wheels, to a work of modern art. By the time of Evelyn's visit to Bascom's office, he had attached red streamers to its handles, had interwoven colored crepe paper strips through its spokes, and had clipped playing cards onto the bars of the wheel housing. They clicked against the spokes when the wheel turned, just as they did on his first bicycle more than seventy years earlier.

With Helen leading the way, he hummed *"Pasodobles Toreros,"* the "Music Of The Bullfight," and pushed his wife into the examining room with all the pomp of a Spanish toreador entering a bullring.

"Hello, dear people," Bascom said as he entered the room a minute later. He took his chair from under his desk and straddled it in front of Evelyn. "How are you today?"

"We're fine, Batson," Ben said, adjusting his toupee. "Do you get it yet?"

"Get what, Ben?" he asked without expecting an answer.

"Fran told us the laboratory tests were all normal."

"Yes they were. I apologize for not calling you myself, but she's conscientious and wanted you to know right away."

"I'm glad she did," Ben said. "Waiting for test results can be nerve-wracking."

"You're right. Sometimes we forget how much our patients worry about them, since they always presume the worst.

"How do you feel today, Evelyn?" he asked, turning to

the wan woman in the wheelchair.

"Better," she said wearily. "I'm stronger and not as tired as usual, but I don't have the energy to walk today. I wish I could regain some weight. All my clothes hang like sacks."

"It's good to hear you're feeling better," Bascom smiled. But he knew Evelyn could not be stronger and too weak to walk at the same time. She was fighting her disease with optimism, an effective weapon against the relentless destruction of her nervous system. It was a far better and safer therapy than anything he could offer her.

"I think so too, Beetle," Ben added. "Do we need to do anything else?"

"Just make sure Ev eats a balanced diet and exercises as often as she can. Bring in a physical therapist if she won't exercise on her own. It'll do more for her than all the pills in the world. And schedule monthly appointments, even more frequently if you like, until we solve this problem."

Bascom rose and rested his hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "We'll beat this together, Ev, I promise. Call whenever you need me."

"We will, thanks. Vroom, Vroom!" Ben said loudly as he revved up the wheelchair and screeched out of the room with the cards clicking a brisk staccato against its spokes.

As Bascom was updating Evelyn's chart, Helen told him a Dr. Frank was calling from Phoenix. He went to the phone in his office and spoke briefly to the physician. He agreed to meet him that same afternoon.

Douglas Frank was chairman of the Health and Consumer Affairs Board, HCAB, in Phoenix, and as soon as Bascom arrived in his office in an old building in the center of the city, his nurse showed him into the doctor's private

office.

"Welcome," Dr. Frank wheezed. He was a middle-aged, thin, short of breath, and spoke slowly.

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

"No, thanks," he replied. Frank nodded, and his nurse left the room, softly closing the door behind her.

"Have a seat," he said, pointing to a Chippendale chair in front of his antique desk. "Your newspaper article about EDs was interesting. Has anyone contacted you about it?"

"A few patients did. The hospital owner went through the roof, the Governor and AHCCCS didn't, and the Arizona Medical Association said 'thanks but no thanks.' Medicare said it was interested, but not today."

"Typical responses from bungling and or corrupt politicians. Poor care and overcharging are rampant in this country," he scowled. "We've formed a committee to control the problem locally before the government takes over and screws up everything even more than it already has.

“Would you like to testify at our next meeting?"

“Sure," Bascom answered excitedly. “When?”

“It's in a couple of weeks." Frank handed him a card. "Call the secretary of HCAB for details. You'll have to excuse me now. I have an appointment with my cardiologist."

Chapter 28

Lightning flashed in a black sky as Bascom entered the parking lot at St. Paul's Hospital in Phoenix two weeks later. Torrential rain was arriving from the southeast, and he wished he were home listening to the lyrical sounds of Stan Getz in front of a cozy fire.

He walked though the double wooden doors of the old facility and meandered down its high-ceilinged corridors until he found the domed conference room where the meeting was to take place. Art Compton was at the hors d'oeuvres laden table in the corner of the room talking to a young woman. A microphone, which she kept adjusting with jerking movements of her left hand, protruded from the side of her head like a drooping antler. Bascom walked up to the arthritic radiologist and tapped him on his shoulder.

"Well, whom do we find here?" he asked sarcastically.

Compton, in his pin-striped WCH costume, choked on a cracker. "Hi, Bob," he said, patting himself on the chest a few times. “I heard you were coming tonight."

"Wow! And you came anyway. That took courage,” Bascom chuckled. “At Davidson's meeting George said you didn't tell him Evans ordered unnecessary X-rays. You told me you would. So who was lying?"

"I, er, he, he must have misunderstood."

"Um, I'm sure. I do like your suit,” he said, running his fingers under one of its lapels. “Feels like coward’s skin.

“Is your new contract with Davidson all you wanted?"

"I gotta go do something," Compton replied sheepishly before hurriedly leaving the room.

Bascom sampled as many of the hors d'oeuvres as possible before he heard a gavel rap behind him.

"Everyone to their seats, please," the middle-aged, obese chairperson ordered from the center of the large table in the middle of the room.

"I'm Marvin Adelsohn," he explained, removing an unlit cigar from his dusky lips and placing it in an ashtray after the attendees had taken their places. "I'm acting chairman tonight because Dr. Frank died of a heart attack three days ago."

After the shock of the momentous news passed, he turned to the black man sitting next to Bascom and asked, "Dr. Norman Jefferies, welcome. How are things in the ED at our University Hospital?"

"Fine, Marvin. That's sad news about Doug. I wish he were here," he replied in a derisive east coast accent. It was obvious he and Adelsohn were not friends.

The lantern-jawed chairman shrugged and turned to his casually dressed guest.

"And you are Dr. Bascom, I presume?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Dr. Frank showed me your article. I'm interested in hearing your comments."

"Thank you, Dr. Adelsohn," Bascom said, leaning forward and clasping his hands on the table. "I wrote it to warn my patients that doctors in Whitney's ED routinely order studies unrelated to their diseases, and that the hospital charges ten times more for lab tests than you do here at St. Paul's. The sad result is a child's simple ear infection can cost seven hundred dollars, and chest pain can cost twenty thousand dollars, making care impossibly expensive for our

farm workers."

Adelsohn picked up his cigar and made a show of tapping off its non-existent ashes. "I'm sure you understand that because of 'defensive medicine,' doctors must run all the tests they can," he explained after a minute. "I myself always order precautionary studies on my patients to avoid lawsuits in this litigious world. And I'm sure you understand that what hospitals charge is their business, not ours."

"Dr. Adelsohn," Bascom countered, "I've never heard a patient complain that a competent doctor ordered too few tests to correctly diagnose his disease. Nor have I heard of lawyers filing malpractice suits because doctors don't perform enough tests. They sue doctors who misdiagnose or mistreat their clients, no matter how many tests they order.

"'Running all the tests' when they aren't relevant to the patient's disease, and especially when an incompetent doctor misinterprets their results, is foolish and wasteful."

"You're entitled to your opinion, doctor, but I disagree with it," Adelsohn snarled with a rap of his gavel.

"What do you think about all this, Norm?"

"I agree with Dr. Bascom," he replied, nodding thoughtfully. "Too many doctors, in and out of the ED, order excessively. The situation is disgusting and it is worsening."

"Then I disagree with you too," Adelsohn said with a louder rap of his gavel on its block. "Well, let's take a break," he ordered, stretching his thick neck to see the buffet table in the back of the room.

"There are only a few hors d'oeuvres left, so I'll give you fifteen minutes to finish them, and then we need to discuss important business."

Twenty minutes later Adelsohn recalled the meeting to order. After a few minutes, Bascom, realizing he was no longer needed or wanted, excused himself and left the

room. Norm Jefferies followed closely on his heels.

"Thanks for the help," Bascom said as they walked down the hallway.

"Those who count in this world don't want to hear the truth," Jefferies said bitterly. "There are many reasons why, but none are ethical."

"I figured as much, but came anyway. Do you know Albert Evans?"

"Him! Unfortunately, I do," Jefferies sneered. "He was one of my residents until I threw him out of my program. He runs a million tests, can't interpret any of their results, and hasn't a clue how to treat the occasional disease or injury he diagnoses correctly. I think he finished his training in a small hospital in San Francisco."

"That's interesting. The guy who bought our hospital, Davidson, is from there."

"Simon Davidson?"

"Yes."

"He makes Evans look brilliant (harrumph). They pulled his license ten years ago. Incompetence was the least of the charges against him. I heard he buys up hospitals and makes lots of money when he resells them."

"I wish he were out of the hospital business too," Bascom said ruefully. "As long as the Adelsohns of the world run the clean-up programs, we'll never get rid of roaches like Evans and Davidson."

"It's all about money," Jefferies said with a shrug. "The tons we spend guarantee the sick will get expensive care, but not necessarily competent care. The Davidsons of the world get rich by manipulating the system.

"There are still some good docs who can work in this broken system, but many discourage their children from going to medical school," he said, shaking his head.

"Yet we need to correct the problems," Bascom agreed.

"By the way, do you know Donna Franklin?"

"I sure do. She’s the best and toughest nurse we've ever had,” he nodded. “When she gives an order, nurses *and* doctors follow it."

"She gave me that impression when we first met," Bascom agreed.

"I know. She told me about that episode with the Mexican. She compares everyone to you. Her favorite line is, 'if Bob Bascom were here, he'd kick your butt for doing that.'

“You must be damn good. My assistant director is leaving soon. Why not join us? I could use you."

"Perhaps after I resolve a few problems in Whitney," Bascom replied with a shrug.

"Let me know. Anyway I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again," Jefferies said, "since we're involved in something that's attracting much public interest."

"I'm sure we will too."

"The New Yorker in me loves a fight," he added. "If you ever need my help, give me a call."

"I will," Bascom promised.

Chapter 29

"Bob, would you do me a favor?" Helen asked.

Bascom looked up from the paycheck he was signing. His gray-haired secretary was standing in the doorway next to a thin, neatly dressed man in his late twenties.

"What?"

"Phillip has a sore throat," she said. "Would you please take a look at him?"

"Sure. How bad is it?" he asked, rising from his desk and walking over to the young man coddling his swollen neck in his hand.

"An't swallow," he gurgled.

"Come with me."

Bascom led him into an examining room and had him sit on the table. He took a tongue depressor from the shelf above it, and gently inserted it into the young man's mouth.

"That's exciting," he said ironically as he shined his penlight onto two swollen, pus-filled tonsils. He tossed the blade into the trashcan and took his otoscope from the shelf.

"Let's look at your ears now," he said. As he turned Phillip's head to his left, goose bumps appeared on his arms. His right earlobe was tucked up into itself. It was identical to Joe Thompson's.

This is the fat man's son!

"It's simple tonsillitis," he said as he replaced the oto-

scope in its charging base. "Penicillin should solve the problem, if you're not allergic to it."

"Not," Phillip mumbled.

"Do you prefer a shot or tablets?"

"Aglets. Anks."

"If you can't swallow them, come back for the shot."

Phillip nodded. Bascom wrote a prescription and offered it to the lad, but Helen grabbed it from him.

"Phil," she ordered, "go home and rest. I'll pick up this at the drugstore and will be along soon." He smiled weakly before leaving the office.

"You know, don't you?" she asked when they were alone.

"Yes."

"Joe was the 'Prince of the Town' years ago," she explained, tearing the wrinkled paper from the examination table. “He was in great shape, smart, and funny. Nothing like he is now.” She balled up the paper and deposited it in the trashcan in a corner of the room.

"I loved him until he left me for Carol. A year after they married, he told me he intended to leave her. We met secretly a few times and I got pregnant. It was wrong, but I was young and believed his lies. All that bastard ever does is lie, lie, LIE!" she said angrily, punching her fist into the palm of her hand.

"Joe denied he was the father, of course," she continued after she calmed down, "and I raised Phillip on my own. He never paid me a cent of child support, and it was tough at times. What made it unbearable was the title a few members of my church gave me."

"I can imagine what they were, so spare me. I’m sorry. What does Phillip do?"

"He's a scientist at Scripps."

"Wow! declared “Stop beating up on yourself for a

mistake you made as a girl, Helen. You've made the best of a bad situation and raised a fine young man.

“Be proud of him, and be grateful he's better than his father."

"I am," she said. She gave him a quick hug and left the office, wiping her eyes as she went.

Bascom replaced the paper on the examining table before writing a note on Phillip's chart. It was then he noticed the date: March 15, the ides of March. The date Julius Caesar was assassinated at the foot of Pompey's statue in the temple of Venus in Rome in 44 B.C. It was also the date on which his beloved Cristina had died two years earlier.

I still miss you, Cris.

After writing "no charge" on the slip clipped to the front of the chart, he stuck his pen in his shirt pocket and brought Phillip's record to Helen for filing.

"No charge?" she asked, reading the note.

"No."

"But he's got insurance," she protested. “We need the money.”

"I know, but I don't charge doctors, friends or immediate families of doctors and friends," he shrugged. "It's a rule I'll never change, although I might make exceptions in this town."

"Too bad our suppliers aren't as generous," Helen countered, shaking her head. "Ev's in room two. She looks bad, so smile when you go in."

"I will," Bascom said, lifting the corners of his mouth with his fingers as he turned down the hallway.

"Ev!" he exclaimed gaily, entering her room. "So nice to see you. How do you feel today?"

"I can't walk," the frail figure replied somberly from her festooned wheelchair. "Thank goodness I have Ben." The old man, resting his knobby hand on her shoulder,

forced a weak smile, but said nothing. Evelyn reached over and rubbed her fingers over his.

"Let's see how you're doing today," Bascom said as he knelt in front of her to examine her legs.

He felt her sorrowful eyes boring into him as he palpated her almost non-existent calf muscles. He knew she was trying to decide if he knew she was dying as fast as she knew she was.

"Do you need to run any more tests?" she asked with woeful eyes. The diffuse twitching and increased withering of her leg muscles had silently answered her question, and no test could change that.

"Not today, Evelyn," he responded evenly.

"Do you know the diagnosis yet, Bob?" Wiggins stammered. He would have told Evelyn, but she had not asked him. He was certain Ben already knew the diagnosis, since he was too astute a physician not to have known. He decided to give him time to accept Evelyn's fate before answering his question.

"I'm closer to it. Just make sure Ev eats a balanced diet and exercises whenever she can," he replied evasively. "Even a few minutes a day will keep her joints limber. Did you hire a physical therapist?"

"Yes," Evelyn answered with a nod that never seemed to stop. "He comes a few times a week.

"There are no miracle pills?"

"None that won't harm you, Ev. Primum non nocere – first do no harm – is one of my rules. I don't want your cure to be worse than your disease."

"I believe that too," Ben agreed. "We'll wait a while longer, won't we, honey?" he asked before kissing her on the cheek. "You'll get better. This is just a bad virus or something. We won't let it get us down."

"If you say so, darling," she whispered through quiver-

ing lips.

"See you next month, Bimbo," Ben said as he yelled, "Ole!" Bascom watched the old man limp out of the room, leaning heavily on Evelyn’s wheelchair for support, and wondered how long it would be before he had one of his own.

As he wrote a note on her chart, he rued his evaluations had deteriorated into a mere recording of the agonizingly slow demise of a friend about whom he cared deeply.

He vowed he would be at her side when she died, but he dreaded the moment.

Chapter 30

Bascom sat at his desk in his empty office reviewing his monthly statistics on a gloomy, quiet afternoon. His work had been decreasing steadily since his resignation from the hospital, and he often passed an entire day solving Italian crossword puzzles or puttering in his garden.

His few remaining loyal patients continued to refer friends and relatives to him, but they were often so poor that he usually treated them for free. Helen had tried to convince him to let her charge a small fee to help cover his overhead, but he would not hear of it.

"I've never charged the truly impoverished," he would shrug whenever she suggested it. "I can't start now simply to arrive at some arbitrary income."

"You treat more people for free than you charge," she protested. "And you add a new category to your list of freebies once a week. This might earn you a gold star on your forehead in some doctor heaven, but it has no value here on earth. You have to charge those patients that can pay if you hope to stay open to treat the indigent ones you're trying to protect from Davidson and your colleagues.

"How about ordering a test or something extra on those that can pay?"

"No!" Bascom insisted, shaking his head. "I can't do that either. I charge our patients for the test or two I need to diagnose their illnesses. Running a bunch of tests just to

make money, while pretending I running them to diagnose what I already know, is unethical as far as I'm concerned."

"I see your point, but nobody in this town has charged five dollars for an office visit since Taft was president," she chided, frustrated by his obstinacy.

Bascom shrugged and returned to his crossword puzzle.

Several days later Tom Whitethroat sat on Bascom's examining table, breathing into an oxygen mask he held in his pale, shaking hand. The fifty-eight-year-old half-Indian had suffered from repeated attacks of asthma and pneumonia over the years, and his deeply scarred lungs struggled to keep him alive.

"Doc," he said between gasps. "got... problem... hospital."

"I'm not sure I want to hear it, Tom," Bascom said as he finished preparing an inhalant to clear the man's asthma. He attached the canister to his patient's oxygen mask, and sat at his desk.

"If you must, be brief."

"… minute," he said, raising his index finger high in the air. He took several noisy breaths of the medication, and then smiled as his asthma slowly started to clear.

"Thanks, Doc," he said. "You're a lifesaver. "I spoke with a tech at WCH about the lung studies you suggested," he explained, his voice muffled by the mask. "He wanted a written order. When I told him you were my doc, he said he'd call Abe Grimes for the OK. The tests cost four hundred ninety-five dollars, so I called St. Paul's in Phoenix. They want *forty-five dollars*! Can you believe it?"

"You would have surprised me if you had told me that WCH was cheaper," Bascom replied, shaking his head.

"I'm glad I listened to you," Tom said. "Last year Dr.

Grimes told me I had two months to live. He wanted me to make sure I paid his bill before I died."

"You'll be fine," he laughed. "But I won't let you die until *after* you pay mine. You may leave when you've finished your treatment. Do you have enough medication?"

"I need another inhaler."

"Ask Fran. I have a few samples left."

Bascom returned to his office to find Helen sitting in front of his desk. She waved a letter in the air while humming the theme from *Dragnet*.

"Mrs. Reyes wants to know if she should sign this, Bob," she said handing it to him.

He took the missive and sat behind his desk.

> Dear Parents, (he read)
>
> To better serve you and your family, Whitney Hospital is setting up a "Treatment Permission for Minors Program." This is to obtain your permission to treat your child during an emergency.
>
> By law our ED doctor needs consent before treating a minor during an emergency. Without it a delay would be unavoidable while the hospital searches for a parent or legal guardian. This could have serious consequences for your child.
>
> Participation in this program will let us treat him or her in an emergency.
>
> Sincerely,
> George Cohen.

"Damn these lying people!" Bascom said, tossing the letter onto his desk. "Helen, the law *guarantees* care in a

true emergency, *period*. The ED doc doesn't need to contact anyone before he can save a life. In fact if he refused to treat an acutely ill or seriously injured patient because he didn't have written permission, and that patient died as a result, he would likely lose his license. His insurance company wouldn't be too happy either.

"Cohen is simply frightening parents into signing a document that will let his ED docs treat a kid's runny nose with blood tests, X-rays and anything else they can think of, without the parents' prior consent or even the knowledge of what they're doing to his child.

"Why is the almighty dollar so important that they have to terrorize people to get it?" he sighed. He ran a hand through his hair before interlocking it with its mate on his stomach.

"There's more," she said.

"I can't wait," he muttered.

"WCH was on the Spanish radio station this morning warning parents their children could die if they didn't sign up."

"Damn!"

Helen covered her ears to block out the uncomplimentary Italian phrases Bascom shouted as she left the office.

As he pondered the first two complaints for the day, Fran told him Mr. Purcell was waiting in surgery. When they entered his room together, they found the fifty-year-old mechanic lying on the table with his foot propped up on a cushion. He said, "hi," then lamented about his care in the ED. He handed Bascom a wad of bills, including one for a urinalysis they had never performed.

"Not unless they got it out of my arm," he griped. His eyebrows knitted together as he droned on about his shoddy treatment at the hands of some muscle-bound doctor.

Bascom reviewed the man's bills and realized the hos-

pital had discovered a billing loophole. Doctors ordered twenty-five dollar SMA-12 blood panels because a machine can perform twelve tests more economically and more quickly than a technician can perform one. It was one of the few bargains left in medicine.

Evans had ordered a SMA-12 panel, but the hospital had then charged for each test individually, billing Mr. Purcell three hundred dollars instead of the advertised twenty-five dollars.

"Why did you go to the ED?" Bascom asked, returning the papers to his patient.

"To have that thingy in my heel removed," he replied, pointing in the general direction of his foot. "I can't walk on it. They told me it'll go away by itself."

"When hell freezes over, it will. Is that why Dr. Evans ordered all these tests?"

"Yes," he nodded. "He said he was the best doctor in town because he was so thorough."

"He could order every test in the world, and it wouldn't make…." Bascom shook his head and fell silent. He had warned his patients for months about the hospital, but they continued going there for problems he could treat easily and inexpensively in his office.

"I'd ask for a refund for the urinalysis they never did. Be thankful he didn't order a pregnancy test," Bascom said ironically as he examined the wart on his foot.

"I will," the patient agreed. "I should have listened to you, but I thought your newspaper article was an exaggeration. Now I know it wasn't. I won't go back there unless I have a real emergency."

"Good. Tell your friends also. Have you ever had one of these before?" Bascom asked, scraping the top of the cauliflower-like lesion.

"No."

"It's called a plantar wart," he explained. He took the anesthetic filled syringe Fran offered him. "It's a nuisance, but nothing more.

"Do you have any allergies?"

"Only to needles," the man winced.

"Then this is the worst part," Bascom said, as he injected the anesthetic into the wart. He waited for it to take effect before selecting a curette from his instrument stand.

"You'd get a painful scar if I cut this out, but not if I just scoop it out of its nest," he said, inserting the instrument into the growth. With several quick twists of his wrist, he deftly removed it and put it on a towel on his instrument stand. He pressed a square of gauze over the blood welling up from the wound.

"Are you OK, Mr. Purcell?"

"I hardly felt a thing."

"Good. Fran," he said, "tell Mr. Purcell how to care for his wound." She nodded and put a finger on a corner of the gauze, allowing Bascom to remove his.

"There's no need to return unless you have a problem. Any questions?" The patient shook his head, and Bascom stormed to the telephone in his office.

"You thought this war was over, Davidson?" he said angrily as he dialed the State Comptroller's Office in Phoenix. "We're not even close to signing a peace treaty."

A man answered the phone, and for fifteen minutes Bascom described the financial scalping that occurred daily at the institution on Apache Lane.

"I can't help you, doctor," the man said. "The hospital can charge what it wants for its services."

"Fine, but do its doctors have the right to order tests that have nothing at all to do with the patient's disease, and then bill the state for them at an inflated cost?"

"I'm sorry, I still can't help you," he repeated.

"And I'm sorry I wasted your time," Bascom said irately. He slammed down the receiver and called Helen into his office.

"Take a letter, please," he ordered, drawing his lower lip between his teeth.

"I'm ready, Boss," she nodded and pulled a pad from her pocket.

He dictated a letter to the Joint Commission for Hospital Accreditation and asked her to mail it with a copy of the "Treatment Permission for Minors Program" proposal. Then, from the bottom drawer of his desk, he took out a new folder labeled "'Ripley's Believe It or Not, Medical Division, Whitney, Arizona."

"Add copies of everything to this folder," he ordered, handing it to her.

Next he wrote an article to the Phoenix *Globe* and Whitney *Times* warning patients about Davidson's new billing protocols and price lists. He was proof-reading it when Fran appeared in his doorway.

"Patient in two, Bob," she said with a sinister grin. "She'll make up for the bad news you received today, I promise."

"Um. I'll bet," he said unenthusiastically. He dropped the article on his desk and walked to room two as ordered. A middle-aged woman, considerably overweight and unusually balding for her sex, was holding her shoe in her hand. She smiled broadly when Bascom opened the door.

"What is your problem, Mrs. Voight?" he asked distractedly.

"I stepped on a tack and came in for a tetanus shot," she explained, offering her shoe to him. He noted that the tack had pushed up, but not penetrated, the quaintly perfumed article's inner surface. He then examined her foot.

"Mrs. Smith," he said with a sigh, "the tack never en-

tered your foot."

"Oh, I know, doctor!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed at the thought. "That would have been terrible! I’m here because my mother told me to get a tetanus shot whenever I stepped on a rusty nail."

He smiled at the thought of vaccinating the shoe, but just explained the meaning of the phrase in one syllable words he hoped she would understand.

Even though stupidity had its own price, sent her on her way without charging for the visit.

Chapter 31

A week after writing to the Joint Commission seeking its opinion on WCH's illegal "Treatment Permission for Minors Program," Bascom sat at his desk and read its short, maddening response: "We can't comment on the ethics or legality of the Permission Card."

"Isn't anyone responsible for anything anymore?" he griped loudly. He jammed the missive back into its envelope and called the Commission's office in Phoenix.

"Mr. Fry," he told the voice on the other end of the line, "WCH wants to run kids through its expensive mill and not have to worry about their parents' complaints when they get the bill."

"You're right, they are."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Isn't it your responsibility to keep hospitals in line?"

"Talk to your medical society."

"What does it have to do with this?"

"Sorry."

"Does everybody in this world wear a pinstriped suit?" Bascom shouted as he slammed down the phone. Helen rushed into his office.

"What's wrong now?" she asked, puzzled by the outburst.

"Nothing a permanent return to Italy wouldn't cure," he

replied, banging his fist on his desk. "Davidson invents a scam a day and I can't stop any of them."

"Give it up, Bob," Helen pleaded, her mouth set in a hard line. "This crusade has aged you ten years in two. I can't stand to see you so nervous and irritable. I wasn't happy when you resigned from the hospital, but I accepted it because I thought it would make you feel better. I was wrong. You're worse now than ever."

"Thanks, for your concern, Mum, but I'd like to be alone," he answered crisply, ignoring her admonition.

Helen dejectedly returned to her office, and he read the other responses to his exposé of medical swindles. NBC wrote, "No thanks." *New West Magazine* said the same, but much more succinctly.

"What a country," he complained, tossing the replies on his desk to add later to his Ripley's folder. "A movie star makes the front page of every newspaper in the union for screwing something that isn't his wife or pet, yet corrupt hospitals and unfit doctors screw millions of patients a year, and they don't get a line of print."

Helen knocked on his door as he massaged his temples.

"Want to talk to a reporter?" she asked cautiously.

"No," he replied firmly. He had no wish to talk to anyone, especially reporters. He instinctively distrusted them, but Davidson's lawyer's request for almost one hundred thousand dollars hung over him like a guillotine. He was curious to know if it was the reason for the interview.

"He's local," she insisted.

"OK, show him in," he said with a shrug.

She stepped back from the doorway, allowing an underweight, pimply-faced young man to enter the office. His mohawk haircut consisted of a series of orange tepees standing in a wavy line down the middle of his scalp. Two

gold hoop earrings pierced his right earlobe, and the tail of a lightning bolt tattoo stretched from his shirt collar to his left ear.

"I'm Charles Flemming from the Whitney *Times*," he stated politely, standing in front of the desk, "and I'd like to ask you some questions."

"As long as they're not personal," Bascom nodded. "Have a seat."

Flemming straightened a listing tepee to vertical before sitting on the wooden chair in front of the desk. He placed his camera on the floor next to him and took a spiral pad from his hip pocket.

"Haven't I seen you someplace before," Bascom asked. *Like in a circus?*

"I was at the hospital board meeting," he said with a nod. “Dave Olsen asked me to come. That was quite a show you put on."

"It wasn't a show," Bascom said curtly, irritated by the statement.

"Sorry," Flemming said. "I meant that in a good sense. You had them flubbing lines like the poor actors they are.

“Anyway I spoke with Mr. Cohen about the billing codes you described in your article. He told me,” he paused to thumb through his notes, “'it's possible we overpriced some services, but we're correcting that.'

"He also explained that lung studies cost more here because his equipment allows for more comprehensive testing than at other hospitals, and because it's a private institution not supported by government subsidies other hospitals use to keep prices down."

"*Baloney* to all that!" Bascom replied, angered by Cohen’s attempt to gaslight the public through the press. "I can diagnose most lung problems with a spirogram and a blood gas, two cheap, easy tests. Performing a battery of

expensive tests on every patient who breathes funny benefits only WCH, which *is* supported in part by local tax dollars.

“St. Paul's in Phoenix is also private and it charges one-tenth of what Davidson does. WCH breaks down its blood panels into individual tests so it can bill three hundred dollars instead of the twenty-five dollars it advertises. Pure and simple greed."

"Is greed illegal?" Charlie asked, scribbling on his pad.

"Not by itself, but is 'bait and switch' illegal?"

"I guess so. Anything else, Doc?" he asked, adding a few words to his pad.

"Unfortunately there is," he said, pushing the Joint Commission's and Cohen's Treatment Permission letters across his desk.

Flemming skimmed them. "These look interesting. May I have them?"

"No, but you may borrow them. I'll fine you twenty-five cents a day if you don't return them in two weeks."

"No problem," he said. He slipped them into his pocket along with his notebook, picked up his camera, and exited the office.

Several days later Flemming's article appeared in the *Times,* and Bascom summarized it to Helen after dropping the newspaper on her cluttered desk.

"File this article, you know where. George says he'll treat any patient needing emergency care without a consent form, and that he'll charge a panel as a panel, and not as a bunch of individual tests.

“Think he'll keep his word?"

"Yes and no," she replied. She picked up the newspaper and scanned its front page article.

"He'll bury the 'Permission for Treatment' scam now

that you've exposed it, but I wouldn't bet on the other. People don't understand the mysteries of creative billing, and even if they did, they'd never have the courage to do anything about it."

"Um, you're right," Bascom laughed. "Many of today's brighter high school graduates read at a fifth grade level, and could not understand what Davidson is doing to them. Their ignorance is compost for evangelistic politicians and insurance companies.

"When this country disappears like the Roman Empire did," he added wryly, "the tattooed, body-pierced masses will scratch their beer bellies and wonder what happened."

"You think it could be worse than it is now?" she asked. She dropped the newspaper on her desk, and turned to the filing cabinets.

"Sure. War and peace follow a sinusoidal curve," Bascom explained as she pulled a chart from a top drawer.

"The quality of medical care is still sliding down the negative slope. It'll get worse before it gets better.

"Have our patients call Charlie the next time they want to complain about the scalping their received on Apache Lane. I need a rest from the fray."

"A complete withdrawal would be even nicer," she demurred, returning to her desk with the chart in her hand.

"I'd love to work for the old Dr. Bascom again."

"I'll tell him the next time I see him."

Two weeks later a tired Flemming reappeared in Bascom's office. The tepees of his mohawk were neatly aligned one behind the other, but he needed a shave and had trouble keeping his eyes open.

"Listen to this," he said with a yawn. "A mother took her son to WCH because of stomach pains. She complained to my girlfriend about her bill, and I investigated. They

kept him there for three hours, did four X-rays and seven blood tests before they arrived at the diagnosis.

“Know what it was?"

"Constipation."

"Wow! Did you guess, or did you already hear about the case?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You wouldn't be here if it were appendicitis," Bascom shrugged.

"You're right!" he agreed thoughtfully. "Anyway, they got a bill for thirteen hundred twenty-eight dollars, which included fifty dollars for a *single* Ex-Lax pill, and five hundred ten dollars for blood tests. Cohen admitted his billing office was still itemizing panels when he saw it had charged the teen two hundred ninety-five dollars for a blood panel that should have cost thirty dollars. He said he’d reimburse the overcharges to this family, but not to prior patients, since it was a recent decision to change billing procedures."

"Typical bs," Bascom said.

"I agree. He also jumped on the 'just to be safe' bandwagon."

"How so?"

"He said, 'an ED doctor has to be thorough since he is usually unfamiliar with the patient's medical history.'"

"All he has to do is to talk to the patient and he'll get all the information he needs. More bs."

"And it's waist deep. Do you have any comments for the *Times*?" Charlie asked, resting his pencil on his pad. He tapped his fingers in front of his mouth to stifle a yawn.

"Sure. I’d love to comment,” he said, after a moment. “A doctor who needs three hours, four X-rays, and seven blood tests to diagnose constipation should return to medical school. If he's that dumb, he shouldn't have been admitted in the first place."

"OK," Flemming said, scribbling on his pad. "By the way, the boy is Tony Ricardo. One of your patients," he added before speeding out the door.

Bascom leaned back in his chair. Tony was the uninsured son of a single, unemployed mother. His family was a living example of one of the fictional cases he had presented to Henry Rutledge months earlier. At least he had survived his "care," even if the family bank account had not.

Flemming published his report the next day under the banner "$1,328.00 to Diagnose Constipation," and included Bascom's inflammatory remarks about his colleague's incompetence.

Bascom laughed as he read the article. “I never believed he'd print that,” he thought as he clipped it from the paper and added it to his growing medical oddities file.

Chapter 32

Over the next few months, Evelyn's symptoms waxed and waned. When she felt strong enough, Ben would drive slowly through the ever changing Sonoran Desert, where quail easily outran her Lexus.

Occasionally they would leave early in the morning for Phoenix, where Ben would push her in her wheelchair through shopping malls to buy clothes to fit her shrinking frame, or to a movie theater to watch a comedy he hoped would make her laugh.

Sometimes he would wheel Evelyn into a fine restaurant where he knew she could enjoy a more nourishing meal than what he prepared for her at home. Despite his prodding, she rarely ate more than a forkful of her food, and Ben, depressed and disheartened, eventually avoided restaurants entirely.

On the rare days she felt exceptionally strong and able, they would walk arm in arm up and down the long, wide hallway that connected the guest wing of their luxurious home to the laundry room just past his study. And when the Arizona sun heated the water in their pool to eighty-five degrees, he would help her into the shallow, beach entry and have her sit on the steps while he slowly and lovingly massaged her legs. Over the months of her illness, her calf muscles had atrophied to the size of a child's, and the day when he massaged more bone than muscle, his depression

and frustration over her inexorable illness peaked.

One day as Ben sat in a brilliantly upholstered log chair in his living room, absentmindedly studying the wooden statue of Hotei that stood under the arched entrance to the room, Evelyn wheeled over to him.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said with a weak smile, "or do they say something else now?" She patted her thinning gray hair with a tremulous hand.

His eyes lit up. "A penny's fine," he replied with a smile. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Feeling better today, my love?"

"Your pancakes hit the spot. I'm full of energy."

"You ate only two bites," he corrected. "That doesn't qualify as a pancake.

"I've been thinking. Why don't we get a hospital bed and other equipment that would make life easier for you? My arthritis is making it hard for me to help you in and out of bed, and I'm afraid that someday I won't be able to help you at all."

"You aren't throwing me out of our bed, are you?" she giggled. It was the first time in a long while he had heard her laugh, and it invigorated him.

"Never! I'd probably share it with you. Do they make California King hospital beds?"

Evelyn knitted her eyebrows. "I doubt it. Where would you put it?" she asked.

"In our study. We can discuss the details after lunch. What would you like me to cook for you?"

"Let me think," she replied, listing the items on her menu with a waving finger, "Pheasant under glass, asparagus, baked potatoes, and…." Her voice drifted away and Ben sighed disconsolately. Her revival had lasted only minutes.

He stood from the chair, kissed her on the forehead,

limped to the telephone, and called Bascom. He agreed to see her the next day.

Bascom had often lamented that he passed much of his day unsuccessfully trying to convince patients that cocaine was not Vitamin C, and that alcohol and tobacco were not food supplements. His iterated warnings were usually ignored, and he eventually had to agree with Tiberius, a Roman Emperor who mocked those who, after age thirty, still needed counsel about what was good or bad for their bodies.

Curing real disease, rather than helplessly watching people self-destruct, made his tribulations bearable. Today, however, he would have preferred to face all his vexations at once rather than the singular one awaiting him in his office.

As soon as he entered Evelyn Wiggins's room that afternoon, Ben quickly nudged him back into the hallway and closed the door behind them. He was not wearing his toupee and his ready smile was gone from his deeply lined face.

"Listen, Bob," he said, putting his arm on Bascom's shoulder and turning him from the door. "Ev's symptoms remind me of Lou Gehrig's disease. What do you think?"

"You're right, Ben, it is," he nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Have you told her yet?"

His mouth twitched momentarily. "No, I wanted to speak to you first," he replied dejectedly.

"I'll tell her. It's my job."

Ben looked sorrowfully at his friend, then put his head on his shoulder and wept. Bascom led him into his office and closed the door behind them. "You need to be strong for Ev's sake, Ben. She needs you now more than ever," he said, facing his friend.

Ben pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "I love her so much," he said through sobs that shook his whole body. "She's my Queen, Bob. It was all so wonderful but so short. It just isn't fair."

"Life never is, Ben, but perhaps a miracle drug will come along, or the disease will go into remission, as it sometimes does. She won't die tomorrow or even next year, so think positively."

"I'll try," he murmured. He took a deep breath and rubbed the tears from his eyes. "Money's no object, Bob. I can cover the cost of any treatment, no matter how expensive it might be. If you discover something, you'll let me know, won't you?" he pleaded. "Anything that'll decrease her suffering will help. It's killing me to see her like this."

"Of course, Ben, I'll call you immediately. There is no guaranteed cure as of yet, but we do have many older, safer drugs to make her comfortable."

"Good, we'll use them. Now let's go see my Ev," he said, taking a deep breath to regain his composure. "I miss her already."

They reentered the examining room and Ben limped to his wife's side. He took her hand and pressed it between his. Bascom pulled his chair from under his desk and straddled it in front of her.

"How are you, Evelyn?" he asked the sad figure in the wheelchair. He need not have asked. Deep hollows had replaced the muscles in the spaces between the bones in her hands, and he knew the same was occurring throughout her body. Her disease was progressing more rapidly than he had expected.

"I overheard you two in the hallway," she said, looking at the floor. "What's Gehrig's disease, Bob?"

"It's amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS," he explained. "It was named after Lou Gehrig, a Yankee baseball

player who had it years ago. It's a neurological disease of unknown cause, characterized by weakness, muscle wasting, and quivering. There are no tests for it, so we base our diagnosis on its classic symptoms and signs.

"About thirty thousand Americans have it, Ev. It starts with problems in dexterity or gait and slowly progresses to severe weakness. Your bladder and bowel, sensory functions, and intellectual abilities will remain unaffected."

"Is there a cure?" she asked, looking up at Bascom.

"Unfortunately, there isn't," he replied, shaking his head. "There's a new drug that allegedly controls some of the symptoms, but it doesn't halt the progression of the disease."

"Can I try it?" she asked. Her eyes brightened, and she looked excitedly at Bascom, hoping he would agree.

"Sure, but it can cause weakness, nausea, dizziness, elevation of liver enzymes, and a decrease in white blood cells. I'm sure we'll find other problems with it as more patients use it. It could make you significantly worse."

"Bob's right, honey," Ben added. "Many bad effects of a drug don't show up until it's been around for a while. So who knows what else it can do?"

"Oh, Ben," Ev pleaded, eager to try any medication that might decrease her symptoms. "There's no guarantee I'll get any of them. Please?"

Bascom disliked refusing a drug popularized by the media since patients interpreted his reluctance to give them what they wanted as incompetence or obstructionism. He knew the pharmaceutical industry used misleading advertising and invented diseases just to sell its products, but his patients were not interested in his explanations. When he refused their requests, some would mumble obscenities, stomp out of his office, and transfer their records to a more understanding colleague.

"Ben's right, Ev. The literature is full of examples of new drugs killing or maiming patients before they're pulled off the market," Bascom explained. "But if you and Ben decide it's worth the gamble, I'll prescribe it for you."

Evelyn looked to Ben, her eyes begging him to let her try it, no matter what the risks.

"Remissions also occur spontaneously in this disease," Bascom added, "making it impossible to know if this or any other medication does any good at all. It's absurd, but the only way we can know if it'll prolong your life is to clone you and treat one of you with it and the other with a placebo. Then we see which of you does better."

Ben laughed and nodded. "It's what I used to tell my patients," he said.

"Great minds and all that," Bascom agreed. "Proper diet and exercise are more important to your health than any of these drugs. And even if it's too soon to be concerned, you might think about a feeding tube. You could eventually have difficulty swallowing."

Evelyn shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "I intend to die on my own terms. There will be no feeding tube, and that's final."

"And so it shall be, but you can change you mind."

"How long do you think I have to live?" she asked as she lifted Ben's hand to her face and rubbed his arthritic finger across her lips.

"I don't know. Steven Hawking, the brilliant English physicist, has lived with it for more than forty years. But consider each day a gift. Do the things you've been putting off for a 'better time.' That time is now."

"We'll do what you say, Bob" Ben said as he stepped behind Ev’s wheelchair. “Enough for today. Vroom, vroom," he uttered before immediately idling the engine.

"I've been following your newspaper and magazine ar-

ticles," he said. "Maybe you should have been a journalist. I'm sure Davidson and Cohen aren't all that happy with you."

"They aren't. And they're threatening to sue me, as you predicted they would. I doubt they will though."

"Don't be surprised if they do. I'd prefer a lawsuit to an office fire or a home burglary gone bad. I've seen both and worse around this town. Be careful whom you mess with, and for the last time, don't trust fat Thompson."

"I stopped trusting him ages ago," Bascom said with a sigh.

"Good. I'll call you about the drug after Ev and I decide whether or not to try it, and I'll write to Professor Hawking to hear if he has any tips for us.

"Ev," he promised, leaning over and kissing her hair, "I won't let this take you from me." But her eyes had dulled again and she did not reply.

Bascom moved his chair out of the way and opened the door as Ben again revved up Evelyn's Ferrari, and limping slowly, wheeled her out of the office.

After they were gone, he waited until his composure returned before going to see his next patient.

A few days after Evelyn's visit, Bascom entered his home just as his telephone started ringing. He picked up the receiver and sat on the couch.

"Robby, tell me it isn't so," Donna said quickly.

"It isn't so."

"Does Evelyn have ALS?"

"Where did you hear that?" he asked. The question disturbed him since he did not tolerate leaks of patient information from his office.

"From one of Ben's friends."

"Oh, then you'll have to ask Ev or Ben, Donna," Bas-

com said, relieved by her answer. "I know you're a close friend, but I can't talk to you about her illness since she's my patient."

"OK," she answered. "Well, answer this. If someone did have it, how long would that someone have to live?"

"I don't know. It's an odd disease that can kill in months, years, or decades, although if you're sixty when its diagnosed, you don't have many decades left anyway."

"I hope she doesn't have it. We worked together for years and she's a great person. The news stabbed me like a knife in the gut."

"I know how you feel. How are you doing?"

"Great. Norm Jefferies reminded me just yesterday he still wants you as his assistant."

"I told him I couldn't accept it until I finish my work here. The guy sure is opinionated."

"And you aren't?" she laughed. "You should come on staff. You'd be great together. Like black and white saddle shoes."

"Donna!" Bascom laughed, "that's not 'pc.'"

"Maybe not, but it's true," she insisted.

"I'd love to work with you again, since you're cooler than I in an emergency and can read my mind, but I can't leave Whitney right now."

"No one's 'cooler' than you in an emergency, Robbie. What time will you be up for dinner tomorrow night? Then we'll see if you can read my mind," she teased.

"I already know what's on your mind," Bascom said. "I'll be there at seven and up fifteen minutes later."

Chapter 33

The sun bakes southern Arizona for more than three hundred days a year, but for some of its residents, seeing the golden orb day after day for almost ten months in a row was boring, and they longed for a change. They got their wish on a dreary day in November when a late monsoon flooded the dry riverbeds outside Whitney. The downpour stranded campers and turned modified Jeeps with their huge flotation tires into unmanageable river craft.

On that day Ben and Evelyn were sitting in their living room, he in his favorite hand-hewn log chair and she in her festive wheelchair, when he excitedly waved the *Times* in the air.

"Good news for a change, love. Believe it or not, Bascom beat the hospital!" he exclaimed. "And I've got another article for my scrapbook. Listen to this:

> WCH Accused of Welfare Overcharges (he read)
>
> State Comptroller Robert Maury today accused the Whitney Community Hospital of thirty percent unjustified ED charges.
>
> Testifying before the McBurney Commission looking into fraud and waste in the government, he described the fourteen-year-old welfare

program as “a fiscal debacle.” Maury said he checked two hundred and fifty-five claims for ED services covering a four-month period.

He found that doctors billed for their services at higher than approved codes and performed unneeded services. Medical consultants discovered doctors making cases more complicated and expensive than their patients' symptoms suggested.

"The report could lead to investigations of other parts of the hospital," Maury stated. "Thirty percent is normal when we find over billing. It's never just five or ten percent."

"Isn't that great news, Ev?" Evelyn smiled briefly but made no comment. "Bascom beat them, love! Aren't you happy for him?" Ben insisted.

"Yes," she replied in a slow, unemotional nasal droll, "I am."

Bascom was also elated by the news. Whether it was his or Charlie Flemming's articles that had lured the commission into reviewing Davidson's hospital was irrelevant. It was his first victory, and he celebrated it that night at Il Pappagallo with Donna.

Two months after the *Times* reported the Comptroller's findings, wintry winds, whipping dust tunnels high into a dark Arizona sky, blew Charlie Flemming into Bascom's office. The storm had knocked over the hairy tepees of his mohawk haircut, and he straightened them after he plopped into the chair in front of the desk.

"This details the state's investigation we published in November," he explained, leaning over and putting the let-

ter on Bascom's desk. "It found the overall care of patients in the ED was correct except for one doctor whose histories and physical examinations were substandard. They also state he rarely needed all the laboratory and X-ray studies he ordered, based on the patient's symptoms."

Bascom picked up the letter and scanned it before refolding it. "That's Evans. How about the overcharging?" he asked.

"They reduced reimbursement for reasons that went from 'service not indicated by patient need,' to 'inadequate documentation to support claim for payment.' WCH must return twenty-four thousand one hundred thirty dollars of the two hundred seventeen thousand five hundred dollars it billed the State."

"That's all?" he asked, returning the letter. "One million bucks a year is closer to what they rip-off."

"I know," Flemming agreed as took the letter and put it into his pocket. "Unfortunately you're not going to like my next article."

"Why not?"

"The guy who gave me this told me the charges made by a Whitney doctor, 'not officially identified,' didn't check out."

"Wha… what are you talking about, Charlie?" Bascom stuttered, slamming his fist on the desk. "How can he agree and disagree with me at the same time? Especially after you already reported in the *Times*, and your letter confirms again, that I was right?"

"Dunno. Maybe someone received a cash bonus for rereviewing the charts," he replied cynically as he stood from his chair. "It wouldn't be the first time in this town. Whatever the reason, like it or not, I have to include his statement in my next article."

Bascom nodded gloomily as the reporter left his office.

He rued that Davidson had circumvented the Comptroller's findings, and at the same time had tarnished his reputation in the eyes of the denizens of the dusty town even further. He imagined that Davidson knew about the reversal and was grinning as he tossed darts at a board with his nemesis's image pasted on it.

In Flemming's article the next day, Cohen said, "We were not without fault, but we did not deliberately overcharge our patients." He also stated his ED billed three million dollars a year and since the alleged overcharges represented less than one percent of the total, the state would not be seeking further refunds.

"Damn these lying bastards!" Bascom shouted as he threw the newspaper across his office. It fanned open, bounced off the wall, and slid to the floor. "It's true that twenty-four thousand dollars is less than one percent of three million dollars, but it's over ten percent of of the charges that were *actually* reviewed!"

I'll never beat these people, he groused as he retrieved the newspaper and added the article to the third medical oddities folder in his desk drawer.

Across town, Evelyn was lying in the new hospital bed Ben had installed in his study. She had tried to brush her thinning gray hair, but after two unsuccessful attempts, dropped the sterling silver backed hairbrush into her lap.

"Ben," she said plaintively, "I can't…."

He was sitting in her wheelchair beside her. "I'll do that for you in a minute, my love, but first listen to this nonsense in the *Times,"* he said. "The state has fingered Evans as incompetent, just as Bascom has been saying all along."

He paused and rested a shaky hand on Evelyn's. "You know the bum almost knocked me over while running from

a code in the ED," he said, looking up at her. "I'll bet he's made a fortune ordering all the useless testing he does."

"I'm sure he has. I'm glad you're out of that place," she agreed. "And I'm glad Bob is winning his fight."

"He lost, honey. The state says Evans is incompetent, but the article goes on to say that Bascom's charges of incompetence 'didn't check out.' Can you believe that?" he shouted. "'Didn't check out!' Damn liars. They're all corrupt!"

"You're retired, dear. Remember?" Evelyn said, gently squeezing his hand to calm him. "Besides, you told me that Davidson would find a way to reverse the findings of the investigation. Why are you surprised now?"

"I know, Ev, but still…. Humph, let me brush your hair. It'll relax us both."

Later that day, while Evelyn was napping, Ben clipped the article from the *Times* and pasted it alongside similar ones in the worn leather scrapbook on the coffee table in his living room. He had no idea why the state had overturned its own findings, but it had angered him, since from personal experience he knew what Bascom must have felt as he read the article. What amazed him was that the state had agreed with him in the first place, which was far different from his own case.

At that investigation, still vivid in his mind, the state had taken ten minutes to find Grimes innocent and label his accuser a drunken lunatic. Ben had pasted that article describing the embarrassing details of the investigation in the thick scrapbook of medical misdeeds that had gone unpunished in Whitney since the town was founded. Years later he was still deeply humiliated by the incident, and he could not reread the article without feeling anger and outrage at how inefficient, or biased in favor of the guilty, the state

was in protecting its citizens.

Chapter 34

After repeated pleas from its new chairman, Bascom reluctantly agreed to attend the Health and Consumer Affairs Board meeting in April. He had no idea why he had so persistently hounded him to return. The only news he could report was Maury's ambiguous investigation into Davidson's machinations, and he doubted HCAB would find it useful in its fight against corrupt hospital practices, especially if Adelsohn were still on the Board.

On the morning of the meeting, a cylindrical package arrived from Lizzano in Belvedere, a village of six hundred feisty souls nestled in the Apennines north of Bologna. The town had existed for over fifteen hundred years, and was known as *Lizzan Matto* until about five hundred years ago. It was not “Crazy Lizzano” as the name suggests, but a place of prayer where a christian community had sought refuge from persecution by the pope and the state.

Bascom extracted a poster from the mailing tube, unrolled it on the kitchen table, and grinned from ear to ear. It was a poster of his baita buried under two feet of snow on a gloriously sunny day. Cristina's father, Enrico, a thin, elderly man standing at the front door, was waving him into the picture. In its bottom right corner was shakily scrawled, "*Ci manchi, Roberto. Torna presto, Babbo* — We miss you, Robert. Return soon, Dad."

The picture brought him back to the day when he was

skiing a *pista nera* at the Corno alla Scala, and a woman crashed into him. He was sitting in the snow, berating her skiing abilities, when she pulled off her ski mask. He was dumbstruck by the beautiful flaxen haired, blue-eyed imp who soon would become his wife.

It also called to memory that sorrowful, wintry day when he, Lance, and Enrico had trudged ahead of Cris's black hearse up Via Tre Novembre, the town's slippery, snow covered main street. Despite the howling storm and numbing cold, the entire population of the tiny hamlet had joined the procession that mourned the passing of one of its favorite citizens.

At the path leading to the cemetery, eight of the town's youths had pulled Cris's casket from the hearse, had carried it cautiously down the slippery slope to her family's marble tomb, and had lifted it into a cubicle in a side wall. The granite block, which would forever seal the young woman from the world of the living, stood upright on the stone altar, waiting for a workman to cement it in place after the funeral. Her picture in a silver frame, the mate to the one sitting on his night table, was affixed in the middle of the slab, above her name and the dates of the brief time she had spent in the world of the living.

He also remembered that the intensity of the storm had increased by several measures during the memorial speeches, covering everyone with a soft, white, cold blanket.

After the ceremony, he, Lance, and Enrico had shivered silently in the tomb until Enrico pulled his loden cape tightly around himself, and, with tears in his eyes, had murmured, "She loved you so much, Americano."

"And I her," he had agreed as the old man turned and exited the tomb.

"We're both lost," Bascom recalled saying as they had

watched Cristina's father fade into the whirling snow.

"We'll all miss her," Lance had added before they pulled up the hoods of their parkas and closed the door to Cris's "better place."

They trekked up the hill to his baita, their breaths crystallizing into patches of white fog the frigid air.

Two days later, he, Lance, and a real estate agent had stood in the front room of a small office.

"Is this OK, d*ottore*?" the agent had asked.

"It'll do," Bascom had replied unenthusiastically.

"Cristina asked me to find you an office by the *Delùbro*," he had said, pointing out the window to the cylindrical monument from the Byzantine Empire that opened into the church through an internal door.

"The baptistery is the oldest stone monument in the province of Bologna, dating to the mid-eighth century," he had explained. "Your wife thought it would bring you luck."

"It didn't bring her luck, Paolo," Bascom had replied dejectedly.

"Yes it did. She found love there," he had corrected. "I'll draw up the contract, dottore."

"Thanks."

"It's settled then," Lance had added, turning to the agent. "Now let's look for furniture. What's the name of that town down the hill?"

"Silla. Nice people, good prices, too."

A few days after that Bascom had driven Lance to Bologna's Marconi Airport for his flight home, stopping to buy a case of grappa on his return to Lizzano. Ten days later he had opened the newly furnished medical office he and Cristina had so carefully planned.

His practice had grown rapidly, but his reliance on al-

cohol to ease the pain of her death had grown even faster. He was drinking himself to sleep at night and topping up during the day. Eventually his nervous system had rebelled, and his hands shook so that he could no longer hold his stethoscope against his patient's chest without it vibrating.

Three months later he had put a note on his office door and walked away, knowing word of its closure would spread rapidly through the small community.

As he studied the poster, Bascom remembered the night Lance had convinced him to accept the task of "straightening out the bastards" in Whitney. He had had no idea who they were and why they had earned that title, but he had doubted he was the man for the job, and had repeatedly refused the offer. In the end, however, he had accepted it because he had hoped that his new responsibilities would force him to cast off his alcoholic shackles and begin a new life.

Now he was in Whitney, entrenched in a battle far worse than that which he and Lance had fought years earlier while forming the doctors' union.

He tacked the poster to his living room wall, making sure it was not askew, and then left for the meeting in Phoenix.

An hour later, as he settled into his seat at the table in the old hospital's conference room, Emily Stone, a young WCH secretary, sat down next to him.

"W-What are you doing here?" he stuttered.

"Dr. Davidson asked me to record this meeting," she replied curtly as she set up a microphone and tape recorder in front of him.

He was indignant the Board had not told him of this turn of events, since he could face significant legal problems if her boss played her tape for others to hear, which he was certain he would do. As he was rising from his chair,

having decided to leave the meeting, another participant approached him.

"Dr. Bascom," the studious type with thick glasses and a short, wide nose said, "I read your article about overcharging for blood panels. I found out that our hospital is doing the same."

"It's a nation-wide problem," Bascom answered half-heartedly, falling back in his seat, facing the microphone that stared him in the face like a gun barrel. Rubbing a finger over his closed lips, he thought that if he chose his words carefully, avoiding comments that the panel could consider a personal attack against the San Franciscan and his stooge, perhaps he could still testify and not be sued.

A few minutes later Marvin Adelsohn waddled into the room chomping on a spent cigar and wearing a pinstripe suit a size too small. He glared at Bascom through black beady eyes, before sitting in a chair directly across from him.

Another Pod-Person, Bascom thought.

After the remaining panelists had assumed their places, Dr. Kirnan introduced himself as the new chairman. Wide, slightly tinted glasses, too large for the man's narrow face, slipped down his nose when he nodded to Bascom.

"What news do you bring us from Whitney, doctor?" he queried in a distinctly British accent.

"Before I begin," Bascom said, "I must say it is shameful that you did not notify me beforehand that Davidson would be recording this meeting. If problems arise, I will hold you personally responsible."

"Your comments are noted," the chairman responded politely.

"Since our last meeting," Bascom said, unconvinced by the chairman's weak guarantee of immunity, "the Comptroller has uncovered unnecessary testing, poor care, and

overcharging at WCH. Even though the hospital has admitted its billing errors, the State inexplicably dropped its investigation. It ignored the certainty that the hospital had overcharged on *all* of the bills it submitted, not just those pertaining to the few charts its Comptroller had reviewed.

"As a taxpayer I feel the investigation should continue, and the hospital should return all money the State overpaid it. This sum could easily top one million dollars."

"Dr. Bascom," a young man with a persistent tic of his left eyelid asked, "why did they stop the investigation?"

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"Maybe we should investigate further," Dr. Kirnan chimed in. "Please continue."

"I would like the WCH recorder turned off first," Bascom said.

"Why?"

"Because I intend to name the doctor the Comptroller singled out, and I would like it to remain confidential."

"It should stay on," Adelsohn rebuffed, pursing his meaty lips. "Unless, of course, you're afraid of repercussions from your false accusations."

Bascom's eyes narrowed at the audacity of his pinstriped adversary. Davidson was a *piovra,* an octopus that latches his tentacles onto easily corruptible, incredibly ignorant sycophants like Adelsohn, and then propped them up in front of him as human shields against all adversaries.

"Dr. Adelsohn, your remark underscores your obvious bias, and as is obvious, to me at least, your brilliant show of ignorance," Bascom said coolly.

"Listen here, you--" Adelsohn yelled, jumping from his chair. Kirnan raised a hand, silencing him in mid-sentence. Adelsohn retook his seat, sputtering under his breath.

"If I guarantee you immunity, Dr. Bascom," the moderator asked, "would you consent to leaving the recorder

on?"

"Sure. I'm certain Dr. Davidson will receive a full account of this meeting from sources in addition to his tape recorder," he replied, still unconvinced that Kirnan would keep his word.

"Excuse me?" Kirnan asked, confused by the reply.

"The Comptroller," Bascom explained, "found one doctor making cases more complicated and expensive than his patients' symptoms suggested. Dr. Albert Evans is that doctor. I personally believe he's a threat to his patients and a disgrace to the profession."

"Those are mighty powerful charges," Adelsohn said in a calmer voice that still did not hide his rage. Resting his stubby cigar in an ashtray, he asked, "Can you corroborate them, Bascom?"

"The State already has," he replied curtly.

"Therapy is opinion," Adelsohn said heatedly, "and you can't prove Dr. Evans performed unnecessary tests."

"Maybe we can," the man with the tic interrupted. "If the Comptroller found he did things that were wrong, then therapy might not be just opinion, as you infer, Dr. Adelsohn. I think we should review the report."

Dr. Kirnan struck his gavel on the table. "I agree," he said firmly.

Adelsohn fumed, his index finger nervously tapping a staccato on his cigar.

"Do you have any further comments, doctor?" Dr. Kirnan asked.

"No," Bascom replied, shaking his head. "I do not."

"Then thank you for coming tonight."

Bascom bid good-bye to the panel and left the room. His crusade was over. He had met his duty and then some.

A week later, as Bascom was solving an Italian cross-

word puzzle, Helen put a large brown envelope on his desk. It bore no return address.

"I think you should X-ray this before you open it," she said, her mouth curved into a smile.

"Can't fight destiny," he laughed, "but I'll wait until you're back in your office before I do."

After she was gone, he tore open the envelope and extracted a copy of the minutes of the HCAB session he had just attended. From the document he learned that after he had left the meeting, a WCH doctor had testified that, "Dr. Bascom is a troublemaker who does not appreciate what Dr. Davidson has done for the community. He resigned during a difficult period, and has had no direct contact with the staff or the hospital since then. Everything is working smoothly since Dr. Davidson took over."

You weren't even on staff when I was there, so how do you know what happened back then? Pissant! He smiled when he remembered it was what Ben had called Davidson after the spiffy dwarf had arrived in town.

In another paragraph Dr. Adelsohn stated, "Dr. Bascom, as always, has presented unfounded complaints unsupported by evidence." In its final paragraph it reported that the committee had voted unanimously against requesting a follow-up audit of the hospital by the Comptroller's Office.

The day will come when HCAB members won't have to turn over rocks to look for vermin. A glance around the table will suffice.

He tossed the missive onto his desk prior to filing it in a new Ripley’s folder, and returned to his crossword puzzle.

Chapter 35

The next day Bascom, in his chair with his feet up on the desk, was reading a newspaper when his telephone rang. He dropped the paper and picked up the receiver.

"Pronto!" he said with gusto.

"Hi, Bob. Do you get it yet?" Ben asked tiredly.

"Get what, Ben?" *Don't tell me, let me guess.*

"I hired a nutritionist," he said, ignoring the question as he always did. "I do my best in the kitchen, but Ev won't even look at the meals I prepare for her, never mind eat them."

"Where did you learn how to cook?"

"From the hospital chef," he laughed. "I also hired a respiratory therapist, and converted our den into a hospital room. I don't know how he found out what I was doing, but Davidson insisted on sending over his own people to run it. I told him I wouldn't object, as long as I could send you over to run his hospital."

"Only you would say that, Ben," Bascom roared as tears of laughter came to his eyes.

"I wanted to kick his scrawny butt. Anyway Ev and I have decided we don't want that drug we talked about in your office. I won't let her take a pill that guarantees only side effects. Could you prescribe something for her muscle spasms?"

"Sure. I'll call it in to the pharmacy and have it deliv-

ered right away."

"Thanks. Ev promises she'll invite you to dinner as soon as she's well."

"I'll be there. Should I come see her now?"

"No. She's waiting for me to help her dress so we can go out before it gets too hot. She looks forward to her trips to the park to watch the kids chase the ducks around the pond. She also wonders when I'll drive her car into a tree or onto a park bench."

"That might liven up this dead town. How are you doing, Ben?"

"As I've always said, 'if I can stand and pee in the morning, it'll be a good day.' So far I'm good, even if I'm having trouble with both."

"You have an unbeatable outlook on life," Bascom laughed.

"It might seem silly, but can you imagine how miserable I would be on the morning I couldn't do one of those two things? No matter. As long as I devote every minute to Ev, I don't have the time, or need, to think about myself.

“Oh oh, Ev is calling. Gotta go."

After he hung up, Bascom sat deep in thought, searching for something, anything, he could do to help his friends beat Evelyn's illness, but could think of nothing.

Bascom had promised himself he would withdraw from his battle against Davidson after the Health and Consumer Affairs meeting, but he returned to the fray a few weeks later when a teary-eyed farm worker lamented he could not pay the thirty thousand dollars the hospital wanted for the appendectomy Joe Thompson had performed on him. WCH’s lawyers had pounced on his only asset, a dilapidated fifty-year-old single wide mobile home on cement blocks in the middle of a sandy lot that was only

slightly larger than the structure itself. It was a rudimentary shelter barely fit for habitation, but without it, the farm worker, his wife, and their five children would be living on the street.

Bascom suggested he demand the hospital reduce its bill to five thousand dollars, which he still felt was outrageous, but was probably as low as WCH would go under pressure. If it adamantly refused to reduce the bill, he told the farm worker to send it to the Comptroller's Office along with a note telling them that Dr. Bascom suggested they investigate the overcharging their prior investigation was supposed to have stopped. He asked the man to return after hours, telling him that he would help him write the letter.

A few days later Davidson's lawyers dropped the case against the farm worker, and WCH decreased his bill to eight thousand dollars. Two weeks after that, the patient's "David against Goliath" victory made the headlines in the *Times*, the *Globe*, and the *Guardian*.

Bascom smugly added the articles to his Ripley’s Believe It or Not folder, a sub-category of the Whitney's File of Medical Oddities, that was dedicated to his rare wins in his battle against WCH’s owner. He was certain that Davidson's counter blow would arrive within the week.

He had to wait only twenty-four hours.

"Charlie Flemming's here to see you, doctor," Helen announced from the doorway.

"Tell him I'm busy," Bascom said, trying to remember the fifteen-letter word to describe Gertrude in Alessandro Manzoni's famous novel, *I Promessi Sposi*.

Fear crossed her face. "You really should see him. It's important, "she insisted enigmatically.

La Monaca di Monza! He yelled as he penciled the letters into his crossword puzzle and then looked up. His sec-

retary was shaking her head in warning.

"Show him in," he ordered.

Moments later the bald reporter entered Bascom's citadel with his camera strung over his shoulder.

"What's up, Charlie?" Bascom asked, tossing his crossword book onto his desk. "And what happened to your colorful mohawk haircut and earrings?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now I'd like to hear about the lawsuit," he said, placing his camera on the edge of the desk. He took a red pad and pen from his shirt pocket and sat down.

"What lawsuit?" Bascom asked, scratching his head.

"The one the hospital filed against you in Superior Court yesterday,"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Seriously?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Seriously. Enlighten me." Bascom leaned back in his chair and interlocked his fingers behind his head.

"Dr. Davidson says you owe him a hundred thousand dollars because you resigned before your contract expired."

"That's a lie!" Bascom countered irately. "His representative and I agreed he would cancel my contract if his investigation into ED abuses turned out to be a whitewash, as it did. Besides, he broke the contract first when he stopped paying my rent."

"Who agreed?" Flemming asked, clicking the button on his pen.

"Henry Rutledge. Dr. Thompson arranged the meeting, and George Cohen was there also," Bascom said. He walked to his file cabinet, retrieved a copy of the letter he had sent to Davidson's lawyer, and handed it to the reporter.

"This details the meeting."

"Can I have it?" he asked after skimming the missive.

"Nope," Bascom replied. "Since you were late returning the last letters I gave you, I'll make you a copy."

He retook the letter and went to his photocopier.

"Suing me, eh?" he mused. The machine whirred softly. "I'm curious to know if a jury would condemn me for protecting my patients from incompetent medical care and price gouging,"

"Will you countersue?" Flemming asked.

"Sure. Davidson owes me back rent. I want it, plus interest." He glanced at the photocopy before handing it to Flemming. The reporter folded it into his pad as Bascom returned to his chair.

"It could be an interesting trial," Charlie said as he lifted his camera from the desk. "Mind if I take your picture for my article?"

"Why not?" he replied as a light flashed.

"Thanks," the reporter said. "I'll send you a copy of tomorrow's paper."

"OK. Now, about your hair?" he asked.

"This will be my last article for the *Times*," he explained, rubbing a hand around his bald head a few times. "I've accepted a job in San Diego and had to ditch the mohawk and the earrings for the interview. It'll grow back."

"I'm sorry to see you go," he said, shaking the reporter's hand. "Good luck in your new venture."

Charlie walked toward the door. "You'll need a lot more luck than I before this is over," he said over his shoulder. "Call me when the trial's scheduled. I don't want to miss it."

"Um," Bascom grunted with a shrug.

Helen reentered his office moments later. "I heard," she said with a worried look. "What will you do?"

"Nothing. This is a rumor. I don't believe Davidson wants his schemes on record. He's just trying to intimidate

me."

The next day the news of the Whitney Community Hospital vs. Robert Bascom, M.D., lawsuit filled the front page of the *Times*. Helen's hand shook as she handed Bascom the newspaper.

"You won't like this," she said delicately. "Remember your blood pressure."

"I'll try, Dr. Sylva," he said with a smile.

According to the article, the hospital argued it did not owe him rent, but Flemming wrote that Cohen had given him a copy of his letter of resignation stamped, "received December 6." Since his contract had expired in November, it was written proof he had fulfilled his agreement. Davidson had not paid him his rent for the last two months of that year-long tyrannical agreement, and if anyone was in breech of contract, it was he.

As for the meeting itself, Rutledge denied agreeing to his resignation, and Cohen did not remember attending it.

“Damn tape recorder!” he cursed. He could feel his blood pressure rising.

In the last paragraph of the article, Joe Thompson was quoted as saying: "I remember Dr. Bascom promising to stop writing negative articles about the hospital if Dr. Davidson would tear up his contract."

Bascom leaped out of his chair, and with his blood thundering in his ears, yelled, "that son of a syphilitic whore!" He slammed his fist on the desk. "Rutledge offered to tear up my contract if I would stop execrating his boss. That bastard Thompson reversed our agreement to make me look like a blackmailer! Damn him to hell!"

"Calm down, please, Bob. What will you do?" Helen asked, backing away from the desk.

"It’s simple: 'Tell the truth, but keep one foot in the

stirrup.' It’s an ancient Arabian proverb my mother taught me.

“I was a fool, Helen,” he sighed in desperation. “An egotistical fool! I should have returned to Italy after Perkins let that man die because he was Mexican, or fled the medical cabal here when Norman Jefferies offered me a job in Phoenix. But I thought I could actually straighten out this place. Everyone but me knew that would never happen. Thompson's statement has ruined my reputation, I'm almost bankrupt, and losing this lawsuit would guarantee I remain in Davidson's debt for years to come.”

He pressed his lips into a thin line as he envisioned his gloomy future in the dusty, hot town.

"So what will I do?” he repeated Helen’s question after a minute or two. “There is nothing I can do. I'm trapped here," he lamented. He sat down and ran a hand through his hair before continuing his lament.

"People believe the first thing they hear or read. Nothing I could say now would convince anyone in this town that I’m not a blackmailer. Next they would believe that everything I was doing to help them was a simply a way for me to gain some esoteric reward," he mumbled.

"Thompson only hinted at all that in his statement, but it was enough. Even if he recanted it, which Davidson would never let him do, the press would print the retraction under an ad for tractors on the last page. No one would see it or believe it if they accidentally came across it."

"Bob, you’re not an egotist, you’re an idealist and an iconoclast,” Helen said, shaking her head. “Not a great combination, but no one’s perfect,” she added. “You’re surprised that a wave carried away the sand castle you built too close to the water, and you can’t decide whether to rebuild it further from the water, or just pretend it was a freak accident and rebuild it exactly where it was.

“It’s an easy decision for anyone but you. If I can help−−"

"No, no you can’t,” he replied quickly, turning his back to her. “Just go back to your office and shut my door on the way out. And cancel my appointments for today.

”How many do we have?"

"Three."

"Big fu…, big deal."

Within a week of the article Bascom's work had decreased even further, and he learned the not unexpected reason from one of his patients.

"Rod and I read about the lawsuit," the retired shopkeeper said during her examination. "We're sorry the hospital has to sue you to get its money back. And what Dr. Thompson said you tried to do to Dr. Davidson, well, we just didn't think you were like that."

Bascom was fuming. "Do you think I'm a thief and a blackmailer, Mrs. Phelps?" he asked irately, barely able to control the tremor in his voice.

"Well, we pray you'll do what's right," she replied after a brief hesitation.

He could not know if Davidson had expected this result from his lawsuit, but to the religious zealots in town, the mere fact that Whitney's largest employer was suing him was proof enough of his guilt.

"Take two of these a day, Mrs. Phelps, and you'll be well in a week," he said, handing her a prescription. *And I hope you choke on them.*

He was still livid when he exited the room and encountered his meager staff in the hallway. "I've got to decrease your hours, Helen," he said apologetically. "Our work has slowed too much to keep the present schedule."

"Fran has something to tell you," she said mysteri-

ously.

"Hal and I are getting back together, and we're moving to San Diego where he has a good job," the pretty nurse explained, smiling as if she had just won the super lotto. "Helen can take over my duties as long as you'll run the lab."

"I can do that. I'm happy for you, and I wish you many exciting Tuesdays," he said with a knowing grin.

Fran blushed and looked at Helen, who arched her eyebrows and shrugged. "Thanks, and the same to you," she beamed now that he knew her secret. She kissed him on the cheek, gave Helen a hug, and left the office.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Helen said when they were alone, "Cohen has taken a job as assistant administrator at a Los Angeles hospital. Gossip has it Davidson fired him because he balked at a new rip-off. And you thought he didn't have a conscience."

"One down, but it's like chopping heads off a Hydra," he agreed sarcastically. "Ninety-nine more to go, or whatever the count is."

A week after the *Times*'s article, Bascom was beginning to think Davidson's lawsuit was pure fantasy until a burly court officer in his official gray garb arrived in his office.

"Dr. Bascom?" he asked.

"You've been my patient since two days after I arrived in town, John," he replied, "and you still don't know if I'm Dr. Bascom?"

"Sorry," he said, handing him a large brown envelope. "It's the law. We have to verify the identity of the person we give these documents to."

"I see. Then thanks, I guess."

After the officer left, he tore open the envelope and skimmed its thick collection of documents. Its legal boiler-

plate and causes of action made only moderate sense to him. He put the complaint on his desk and searched the phone book for an attorney in Phoenix, since he doubted he could trust a local one.

The first lawyer he called asked if he were the doctor who had been the subject of repeated scandals in the newspapers.

"Yes, I am," he replied with a short laugh.

"Hold the line, please."

Minutes later the squeaky voice said, "Sorry. My associates and I are busy for the next year." Bascom was still laughing when the line went dead.

The next one asked if he had twenty thousand dollars for his retainer. When he said no, the lawyer said coldly, "ethics aren't worth bankruptcy. Beg Davidson for forgiveness and back off. Crow doesn't taste so bad if it saves a hundred thousand bucks."

"Thanks anyway," Bascom muttered as he hung up.

The next two lawyers gave him similar advice, but the fifth, Frank Helleman, set up an appointment for him the next day.

Chapter 36

The next morning Bascom drove to Frank Helleman's office in Phoenix, an elegant Victorian mansion on Central Avenue north of the bustle of the city. The restored gingerbread building sat majestically in the middle of a manicured lawn, surrounded by desert willows and mesquite trees.

He parked his SUV at the side of the building and entered through a stained glass door. A sloe-eyed, red-haired woman guarding the portal to the Hobbes & Helleman law offices directed him to Frank's office.

"Through that door then straight to the end. Last door on the left," she rattled off with a smile.

"Thanks," he answered, repeating the directions in Italian. As he walked down the hall, he glanced at the diplomas and the figures in 1940s dress hanging from its gray walls.

He knocked on the oak door and a husky voice drowning out Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* invited him into a spacious, plushly carpeted room. Floor to ceiling mahogany bookcases filled with identically bound legal texts lined one wall. To the right of his desk, below a painted Victorian leaded glass window with a ruby glass border, sat a sixteenth-century Italian globe bar between two Chesterfield high backed wing chairs.

"Have a seat," the bespectacled, forty-year-old lawyer

said, pointing to the captain's chair in front of his maple writing table. He rested his unlit meerschaum pipe in a silver ashtray and closed the book he was reading.

Bascom sat down and rested his leather briefcase on his lap.

"You're on time," Helleman said, checking his watch. "Unusual for doctors. You told me a hospital is suing you.

“Do you have the complaint and your agreement?"

"Yes," Bascom nodded. He took a few papers from his briefcase and handed them over the desk. Helleman perused them, pausing often to write notes on a yellow pad. When he finished, he removed his horn-rimmed glasses and set them on the documents.

"Why did you leave?" he questioned, looking Bascom in the eye.

"To protect my patients," he replied simply. For the next thirty minutes Bascom summarized the events leading to the complaint, and then concluded, "The committee investigation was a farce and I resigned, as per my agreement with Rutledge."

"Did anyone hear him agree to let you resign?"

"The hospital administrator and Dr. Thompson did, but they have since forgotten they even attended the meeting."

Helleman shook his head and made a clicking sound with his teeth. "Too bad. Your deal won't count without witnesses to support his oral modifications of the written agreement." He clasped his hands together on the desk and leaned forward.

"Do you still talk to Davidson?"

"Through the press," Bascom replied, handing the lawyer his newspaper articles. Helleman scanned the titles and then dropped them unceremoniously on top of the other documents.

"What would you like me to do for you?"

"Get me justice and my back rent, plus interest."

"How much is that?"

“Forty-eight hundred dollars."

Helleman shrugged his broad shoulders. "That's not much for all you've been through. How about a million dollar reimbursement for defamation of character and sexual impotency resulting from stress?"

Bascom laughed. "Not interested, besides, the stress isn’t *that* bad. I just want you to prove I was right to leave when I did, and to get me my back rent."

"I'm glad you didn't ask me to file a frivolous cross complaint," he said. "I would have refused. I might be able to get you your rent, but I can't promise you justice."

"Mr. Helleman," Bascom explained, tapping impatiently on his briefcase, "as long as WCH fulfilled my needs, I would have admitted my patients there. But when the level of care fell and costs went through the ceiling, I had no choice but to consider my patients' welfare and resign."

"Has anyone else commented on the problems?" Helleman asked, rubbing the side of his index finger with his thumb. He winced as he touched a spot, and then scraped at it his thumbnail.

"Sure, but they'll deny it."

"Damn cactus spines,” he muttered. “I should let my wife rake the yard. She could use the exercise." He scratched it loose and then brought it up to his eye for closer examination.

"So no one will testify for you?" Helleman asked. He brushed his nail on his blotter and then made a notation on his pad.

"Probably not, but no matter. I had no choice but to correct the problems."

"Why was that?"

"I was the ED director, and it was my responsibility to make sure patients got proper care."

"I've never heard anything like this before," he said. He circled a word on his pad and then scratched his head.

"You expect me to believe, doctor, that you walked away from a good contract knowing you would have to repay everything the hospital gave you if you voided it, just to protect your patients? And all you want is forty-eight hundred dollars back rent?"

"Plus interest."

"Which will be pennies, since you'll get legal, not bank interest. This is the darnedest thing I've ever heard in all my years in practice.

"Do you have their hundred thousand, and another ten thousand, at least, for me to defend you, win or lose?"

"No," Bascom responded. "But I'll find the money. Besides, I expect you to win. That's your job."

The lawyer nodded. "So it is, so it is," he chuckled. He picked up his pipe and walked to the window in the rear of his office. Bascom noticed that the man was well over six feet tall.

"Nice day," he said, staring out the window and sucking the stem of his pipe. "But when isn't it in Arizona?" he asked without turning around.

"Have you thought of rejoining the hospital staff? I'm sure Davidman would like to settle this amicably."

"It's Davidson, and that will *never* happen!" Bascom replied heatedly, jumping up so quickly from his chair that his briefcase fell onto the floor. "I would quit medicine if a judge forced me to!"

"Calm down, doctor. Lose your temper on the stand and you lose your case," Helleman explained, returning to his desk. Bascom dropped back into his chair, picked up his briefcase, and again rested it on his knees.

"Lawyers usually don't want to know if their clients are guilty, but in your case, I'm curious. Is everything you just told me true?"

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't," Bascom replied firmly.

"Um. Well, we have a few defenses here," he said after a few minutes of thought. "One, the hospital breached the contract when it failed to pay your rent, allowing you to leave legally. But I'll need proof you were on staff until December. Davidson may say he stopped paying because you verbally resigned in September, but you didn't submit your written resignation until ––"

"I operated on a patient in November," Bascom interrupted. "And I wouldn't have resigned before the meeting in December, since I had hoped it would resolve our differences. Had I resigned in September, there would have been no surgery and no investigation."

"The surgery is OK," Helleman nodded, "but December's still shaky. They can say you resigned right after the surgery, and then, only after their pleading and apologizing, you returned on staff to try to resolve the issue."

Bascom knitted his eyebrows. "Whose side are you on?" he demanded angrily.

"Yours, believe me," Helleman smiled. "But I want you to understand how difficult they can make this case if they want to.

"Anyway, write down everything you told me, including the article where the hospital admitted over billing but refused to reimburse its patients, the Comptroller's audit, and the treatment permission letter.

"Have I forgotten anything?" the lawyer asked.

"There is the Lavabo Laboratory scheme," Bascom replied, "plus the hospital's billing blood panels as individual tests to increase the costs tenfold."

"OK. Add them to your list. Next there is the agreement between you and Rutledge. It won't stand, even if people get their memories back, since they've already denied it ever happened. We can forget it.

"Last, and this is pure legal fantasy, we'll say the hospital breached an ‘implied warranty’ to provide high quality care at a fair price, which formed the underlying basis for your agreement to enter the contract."

"Finally!" Bascom exclaimed, smacking his hand on his briefcase. "You understand the problem! But why is that defense a fantasy?"

"Because it doesn't exist in law," he answered, throwing his arms out wide. "We can defend their lawsuit without it, but it will give Davidson's lawyer something to worry about. If you intend to expose the hospital, which will be costly, time-consuming, and probably unsuccessful, this may be the knife that cuts the deepest."

"What do you think of its chances?"

"Harrumph," he grunted with a shrug. "To tell you the truth, not much. It might work if we're not thrown out of the courtroom by a blockheaded judge. We'll need the records the committee audited, and then we'll have to convince a doctor with credentials to counter WCH's hired specialists who'll testify the records are correct and that your disagreement with them is an example of 'twenty-twenty hindsight and subjective judgment.'

“WCH will pay them big bucks to make you look like a bungling, blabbering, troublemaking idiot."

"It won’t cost them that much," Bascom laughed. "Will the jury buy it?"

"Maybe," Helleman replied, holding his eyeglasses up to the light. He took a handkerchief from his pants' pocket, exhaled warm vapor on the lenses, and then wiped them clean before replacing them. "They like certificates. As

long as a witness owns a parchment with a raised seal, they're happy. It makes no difference if he makes his living as a highly paid professional expert witness, or is a dodo that forgets to pull down his pants before sitting on the can. They'll always favor the specialist over the generalist.”

Bascom laughed loudly at his mental image of Frank’s dodo.

"Are you specialized in emergency medicine?"

"No, but I was the ED director at WCH and in an ED on the east coast before that," Bascom replied, still chuckling. He was incredulous at how the judicial system worked.

"Would a jury find for Davidson simply because I'm not a specialist?"

"Don't overestimate its intelligence," the lawyer explained, "since it's made up of people not smart enough to come up with reasons to be excused from duty."

Bascom laughed again. "Most encouraging. So how do you intend to convince Davidson to turn over some damning records?"

"I don't know yet. He'll pressure you into giving up your case before we even get to trial by filing a flurry of absurd delays and appeals that will cost you thousands to counter. North will do everything in his power to prevent a judge and jury from even hearing this story."

"Do you have any thoughts about the trial?"

"Not at the moment. The problem right now is the judge at what we call 'law and motion proceedings.' Most here would not understand the real basis of this case, which I’m having trouble understanding myself, and that would swing opinion in favor of the hospital. This is especially true when it comes to discovery that involves confidential patient records.

“Anyway, I'll file an answer to their lawsuit and cross-

complain for the rent they failed to pay."

"Plus interest," Bascom reminded him.

"*Plus* interest. Boy, you're a bulldog."

"It's my strongest trait, after cynicism."

"We'll see," Helleman laughed. "I'll also file a cause of action in the cross-complaint for interference with business relations, which is a claim for the business you lost because of such practices as redirecting patients and telling them you've left town."

The lawyer leaned back and rubbed an eyelid. "While it's not yet clear who might be the proper individual or governmental plaintiff," he said, "there is the possibility of a class action suit on behalf of all WCH's patients, brought against the hospital for the total amount of the over billings and its other questionable practices. I'll alert the various governmental agencies that might enforce these claims, and I'll try to generate enough interest on their part to conduct a more thorough investigation into WCH's practices."

"That's it?" Bascom asked innocently. "No bombing and strafing the hospital?"

The lawyer laughed again. "Not today."

"OK, I'll hear from you?" he asked, clasping his briefcase and standing from his chair.

"You will," Helleman agreed.

They shook hands, and Bascom left the office. Helleman had offered him only hope, but it was enough to put a smile on his face and a spring in his step as he returned to his SUV.

Chapter 37

The next evening Ben Wiggins sat with Bascom in his living room. He had called in sick for the first time since his arrival in Whitney, and Helen had asked the old physician to make a house call on her employer.

"How do you feel?" Ben asked as he wiggled the arms of his chair. "You should tighten these before the chair collapses."

"I'm better, and I will," Bascom said, lying on his couch. He closed his robe over his hairy legs. "Just a simple cold. You didn't need to come over."

"Helen was worried, and we need to keep our women happy," Ben explained. "How's the lawsuit coming along? It's the talk of the town."

"So my patients tell me. I found a lawyer yesterday. He thinks we've got a good chance of winning, and even though he didn't mention it specifically, that I'm on the moral high road."

"Ha!" Ben exclaimed. "Morality won't get you far in this town, or probably anyplace else in this world. You're like the soldier who refuses to kill an unarmed civilian and is then executed for disobeying orders. As a physician you're supposed to uphold medical ethics, but if you do when you're ordered not to by your colleagues, they crucify you.

"I warned you they would cut you to pieces, and

they've just begun," Ben explained, wiggling the chair's arms again. "There's only one ass in town big enough to do this – Thompson's."

Bascom laughed. "You don't miss a thing, do you?"

"I never miss the obvious," he replied, adding quickly, "Usually I'm optimistic, but I know these people. They will do their darnedest to destroy you."

"Why?"

"Because you're a danger to them. They want you dead or gone. In fact if you left tomorrow, Davidson's lawyers wouldn't even come after you."

"Are you kidding? And give up a hundred thousand bucks plus their fees?" Bascom asked, sitting up on the couch. "I doubt that. Plus how can a recluse like me be dangerous?"

"You know the truth and aren't afraid to follow it wherever it takes you," Ben explained. "Our corrupt, incapable colleagues know you see through their pathetic ploys to squeeze money out of our migrant 'stones,' as they refer to them. You've already exposed the hospital and Evans, and they intend to stop you before you expose them personally."

"Are you afraid of me too?" Bascom asked. He coughed a few times, and then blew his nose into a tissue that he dropped into a small trashcan by the couch.

"Of course not, and I never was. I knew what you would do here as soon as Donna told me about the incident with Perkins, our altruistic doc who won't treat you if you're not white.

"Why not return to Italy and forget this place?" Ben asked. "You could open that clinic on the mountain you told me about?"

"I might someday," Bascom replied wistfully, "if I ever find the money. But I can't leave until the lawsuit is re-

solved and, more importantly, until you have no further need of my help with Evelyn."

Ben knitted his brows in thought. "Suppose she lives another forty years, like Professor Hawking?" he wondered after a few moments. "Will you stay that long?"

Bascom shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. Why not ask me something easy, like 'do I get it yet'?"

"Because you don't, and might never. It doesn't surprise me though, since few people ever do 'get it'. But you need to think about your future. I'll take care of Evelyn. She reads about you in the newspapers, and what they're doing to you upsets her. She says it brings back unpleasant memories."

Bascom fell back on the couch. *He must be referring to his humiliation by the state over Grimes's performing abortions on teenagers.* He coughed again and then pressed the back of his hand to his forehead.

"Want me to kiss it?" Ben volunteered. "My mother always kissed my forehead to check if I had a fever."

Bascom laughed. "Thanks, but you're not my type. Tell Ev I'm just a foolish person who attacks windmills. Once I accept the fact that the real problem is the wind and not the mill, I'll be OK."

"Very perceptive, but an impossible opponent," Ben laughed.

"By the way, how is Donna?"

"Busy. I call her now and then, but it's hard to get to see her. It's been a while."

"I know. She calls Ev every day to check on her, sometimes more than once. They're like sisters, or mother and daughter, and gab forever – well, maybe for two minutes. It's all Ev can handle, but calls from friends keep up her spirits."

"Does she ever mention me?"

"Among others," he replied cryptically. "Well, it's time to return to Evelyn. I need to hold her. It recharges both our batteries.

“Shall I send my inflated bill for this visit here or to your office?"

“Send it to Davidson,” he said. It brought a rare smile to his face.

As a result of his running several times a week for months, he had lost the all the weight he had gained since Cristina's death and needed a new wardrobe. After work one day, Bascom stopped by the local western shop to buy a new pair of jeans, a couple of piped cowboy shirts with pearl buttons, a Stetson Boss of the Plains hat, leather boots, and a black belt with a bull’s head surrounded by gold braid in the center of its silver buckle.

Helen was bending over her keyboard, her gray hair covering her face like a diaphanous curtain, the following morning when, dressed in his new garb, he knocked on her Dutch door. She brushed her hair from her face, and after her shock at seeing the new Bascom, exclaimed, "You look different, Cowboy! Are you on drugs?"

"Nope," he responded lightly.

"You sure could have fooled me," she said with a grin. "You've got eight patients this afternoon, including Evelyn. A record for us. But you’d better charge them all, since our landlord is increasing our rent fifteen percent starting next month."

Bascom paled. "If he raises it again," he stated, "we'll convert an ice cream truck into a mobile office and ride up and down the streets ringing our bell and offering a free rectal exam with each frozen fudgesicle."

"You're sure you're not on drugs?" she repeated.

"Nope. That's what real cowboys say, ain't it?" he

asked. He tilted his hat back on his head and strutted down the hall to his office. He sat behind his desk, he put his feet up, and dialed a number. On the second ring a male voice answered.

"Hi, Jonas, this is Bob Bascom. How Carl is doing?"

"This *is* Carl, Dr. Bascom, and I'm doing fine," the boy replied.

"Carl! I didn't recognize your voice. How's your therapy coming along?"

"I can walk OK, but my right leg and arm are still stiff. Mom says I'm lucky to be alive, so I shouldn't complain."

"You'll be fine. How are your parents?"

"They're OK. Dad's working and mom's shopping."

"Say hello to them, and keep up the good work."

"OK, Dr. Bascom, and thanks for everything."

Bascom hung up and made a house call on his favorite patient, hoping she had made a similarly dramatic improvement.

Chapter 38

On a Saturday afternoon a few weeks later, Bascom was doing push-ups in his living room when his telephone rang. *If Friedrich Nietzsche had disliked postmen, he would have hated cellphones,* he thought as he wiped the sweat off his brow with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. He flipped open his cellphone and said, "Yep."

"Hi, Bob, Helleman here. The good news is that it's a beautiful day. The bad news is that North refuses to give us the records."

"Merda! Did you expect anything different?" Bascom asked.

"No, but even if we were to get them, releasing medical records to the public evokes concern. I'm sure that if the court decides to release them, it will allow WCH to delete the patient names."

"That doesn't bother me. As long as they don't change Evans's orders and notes, we're still OK," he assured his lawyer.

"That won't happen. By now I'm sure you realize this procedural gimmickry will consume a considerable amount of time and money, since, as I told you, WCH intends to appeal any adverse orders requiring the production of documents."

"Frank, I don't mind waiting, but keep it to a minimum, OK?"

"I'll try."

Bascom snapped shut his phone and returned to his push-ups.

Lawyers are like women. You can't live with them and you can't live without them. Necessary evils – like doctors.

On the night of December 15, two weeks before his first hearing, and after a harrowing drive through a blinding sandstorm that had reduced visibility to a few feet on Route 10, Bascom entered Helleman's office wearing his new cowboy shirt, jeans and Stetson. The office decor had not changed since his first visit, although the upper half of the Italian globe in the corner of the room was now upright, exposing an array of liquor bottles and crystal glasses in its lower section.

"Ciao," he said, sitting in front of the desk. He removed his hat, banged it on his knee to knock off any dust it might have accumulated on the trip down, then rested it on his lap.

"Ciao. I've never seen an Italian cowboy before," the casually clad lawyer repeated. He turned off Bach's *Fugue*.

"They're around. Would you like to see my spaghetti western imitation of Clint Eastwood in *Per un Pugno di Dollari*?"

"Try it and I'll double my fees," he laughed. "Well, down to business. Since WCH won't voluntarily produce the records, I've asked the court to order them released. I've also sought expenses because it refused to surrender them without substantial justification."

"What does North think about that?" Bascom asked as he ran the heel of his hand in the groove in the top of the Stetson.

"Not much," Helleman shrugged. He tapped a black pencil on his desk. "North's asking the court for twenty-five

hundred dollars to pay for his journey from San Francisco to defend what he calls our 'absurd affirmative defense of an implied warranty.'"

"It doesn't seem absurd to me."

"I didn't think it would. He's also filed a motion for summary judgment to strike it because he says there's no legal basis or contractual provision supporting it." Helleman added a doodle to the ones already on his yellow pad. “He says it contradicts the agreement you signed, and he wants the judge to throw it out."

"Wow! That's unfriendly. Could the judge do that?"

"Sure he can. Look Bob,” he said, dropping his pencil on the pad. “I don't think you understand the difficulty of this defense. In the unlikely case you win with it, you win a measly five thousand bucks in back rent, since you refused to let me file the interference with business relations cause of action in your cross complaint. That won't even cover my bill. If you lose, it could cost you a hundred thousand bucks, plus Davidson’s lawyer’s fees on top of mine.

"I think you should swap your idealism for realism," Frank said. He gazed at the globe bar while watching Bascom’s reaction to his suggestion from the corner of his eye.

"You know your colleagues will never support you on this,” he said after getting no response from his client. “They need the 'Medical Grail,' the money they rob from their patients to pay for the big house, the Mercedes Benz, the expensive Ivy League colleges for their spoiled kids, and the alimony to their first couple of wives. You’re an obstacle to all that, and they’re punishing you by stealing your patients and trashing your name. Davidson is simply the icing on your future bankruptcy.”

Helleman pursed his lips and gave Bascom a few minutes to mull over his proposal to drop his implied warranty defense. When his client remained mute and poker-faced,

he sighed and said, "I'd really like you to use WCH's breach of contract to win your case and forget all the rest. I'm sure North knows the wisest thing Davidson could do would be to pay you your rent and quietly drop his suit."

"Maybe North knows what's best for his client," Bascom replied, slowly turning his Stetson in his hands, "but as long as his golden goose has unlimited funds, I doubt he'll kill it.

"If I continue with your implied warranty defense, what do you think he'll do?" he asked, trying to calculate his odds of winning.

"He'll try to eliminate it," Helleman explained, flinging up a hand. "Even if a judge should agree with us now, it would have little impact on your case. We'd still have to convince him and a jury that WCH provided poor, overpriced care to its patients. If we fail, he won't let us try to prove a doctor under contract can insist his continued employment be conditioned on the hospital's keeping certain standards. After all, the hospital's services and prices are its business and not yours."

"That's what I keep hearing," Bascom griped. "Still, I don't believe patients should be economically mauled by tricky billing schemes, or be physically maimed by incompetent physicians."

"Noble, indeed, but North is adamant that the hospital's billing and competency standards aren't relevant to this case."

"So according to his philosophy," Bascom reflected, spinning his Stetson in his hands, "theft and murder were acceptable until God inscribed on a stone tablet that they weren't. Violation of written law is illegal, but ethics are unimportant in the overall scheme of things." His knuckles whitened on the Stetson's brim. He was angry and frustrated that Davidson's lawsuit and the principles fueling it,

were skinning away his onion of beliefs, one thin layer at a time.

"Damn it, Frank," he protested, “I'm not the first to demand that a hospital respond to the reasonable requests of its physicians. Hammurabi did it a few thousand years ago, and with great success. Of course, he chopped off fingers and gouged out eyes when a physician screwed up, but he got his point across."

"We need a more recent and less violent example," Helleman laughed, gently squeezing his cheeks between the fingers of his hand. "I've searched and couldn't find a case on point that has been appealed, and thus would give us reliable precedent."

"So you're saying Davidson has no duty to maintain a minimal code of behavior, with which I disagree. But even if that were the case, does he really believe he can force me to admit patients to his organization that kills and bankrupts them with impunity?

“Alice in her travels through the Looking Glass had it easy by comparison."

"Maybe she did," Helleman chuckled. "Anyway he's asking the court to strike our defense, and he'll pull it off if one of our more thickheaded judges gets the case.

“So, my friend, do we continue on Frost's 'road less traveled,' or not?"

Bascom laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"That quote from *The Road Not Taken.* I've been on that road my entire life, and have been trying unsuccessfully to get off it for years."

"Well, now's your chance,” Frank said. “Just sue for your back rent and ignore the rest. They'll lose, you'll get a few bucks, which you'll turn over to me as partial payment of my fee, and you'll be off the road.

“So what will it be?"

"I need to think about it," Bascom replied. “I’ll let you know.”

He stood from his chair, waved his hat in the air as he saw Roy Rogers do in his TV series, and left the office.

Chapter 39

Six days before Christmas, to Bascom's great enjoyment and wonder, a once in a century snowfall dusted the cacti in his yard. It melted in minutes, and was a far cry from the amount of snow blizzards regularly dumped on his baita in the Italian Apennines, but insignificant as it was, it would turn out to be his emotional highlight of the day.

Evelyn was one of only five patients waiting to see him that chilly morning. The frail woman's thin skin now hugged the curves and crevices of her face as if sucked in by a vacuum. She wore a child-sized blue dress over her emaciated frame, and sat forlornly in her wheelchair, oblivious to her surroundings.

"She's much weaker and laughs and cries for no reason, Bubbles," Wiggins said with down-turned lips as he held her wasted hand. He gently, slowly, rubbed his thumb over the thin skin covering its bones.

"She rarely talks to me, and sometimes doesn't even know I'm with her." Food stains again covered the bald physician's jacket, and he seemed to have aged a year and lost a pound for every month of Evelyn's relentlessly progressive illness.

"Unfortunately, that's not unusual behavior with this disease, Ben. How's her appetite?"

"Poor, but she still swallows OK."

During the final stages of her disease, Evelyn would be

able to chew her food, but would not be able to swallow it. Liquids, unable to pass at all, would exit uncomfortably through her nose.

"Let's see how she's doing," he said before examining her in her wheelchair.

"Not bad," he said a few minutes later. As he returned to his desk, he thought, *Imbecile! She can barely lift her arms above her waist, a feat she could easily do at her last visit, and you say, "not bad"?*

"Does she still take her medications, Ben?" he asked while writing a note on a chart.

"Yes, but they don't help anymore," he replied in an uneven whisper as he stroked Evelyn's hair with a shaking hand. The woman stared vacantly at her lap, ignoring his caresses.

"How are you doing?" he asked, turning to his friend.

"I pass the night reading to Ev, combing her hair, or doing whatever else I think might make her comfortable. I can't sleep because I'm afraid I won't hear her if she calls me," he explained. "I couldn't live knowing I had slept through my last chance to help her or to tell her I love her.

"It's ironic how the wheel of life turns," he lamented, with a wag of his bald head. "I've gone from doctor to nurse, and Ev from nurse to patient. It would have been nicer if our wheels were the size of those on a mammoth dump truck rather than a Mini Cooper. Even so, I'm grateful for the time we've had together."

"Would you like me to admit her to a nursing home? It might be easier on you both."

"Absolutely *not*, no, never, Bob!" Ben said emphatically, shaking his head. "Ev stays at home. I'll take care of her, and she would do the same for me. But I am looking for a nurse to help so I can get a few hours sleep."

"Maybe Donna could come down from Phoenix part-

time," Bascom offered.

Wiggins's eyes brightened when he heard her name. "Are you two dating?"

"Occasionally," Bascom said. "Well, keep up the great job you're doing, and phone if you need me."

"Thanks. We'll see you again soon," he said. With a vroom, vroom that now sounded more like a sputtering Model-T than the roaring Ferrari it once was, Ben limped out of the room, slowly pushing the wheelchair down the hallway. The playing cards clipped to its frame clicked mournfully against the wheels' spokes, like a car with flat tires crawling down a dark alley.

After his friends left, Bascom recalled the adage of a long deceased colleague: "A physician's job is to cure those he can, assist those he can't, and console all." He could not measure the effect consolation alone had on the Wiggins's lives, and to him it seemed a small offering.

According to his records' review that day, he had seen fifty percent fewer patients that month than in the same month a year earlier. He had eliminated every luxury to meet expenses, but unless his practice picked up, he would soon be unable to pay his bills. Yet, when Helen put a patient in his X-ray room, he immediately moved him back into a regular examining room. He rarely performed an X-ray or laboratory studies, and only then when he truly needed to verify his diagnosis. "I won't compromise my standards just because Davidson is suing me," he once had told her.

"Are you going to charge Evelyn today?" Helen asked from his doorway.

"No."

"Have you finished revising the billing schedule as you promised?"

"I changed my mind. Our patients have enough trouble

paying our present charges," he replied. “I can’t raise them.”

"Um. They have trouble paying their bills and we have trouble paying ours. Why not charge Ev?” she asked. “She has insurance and we really need the money.

“Are you sure you won’t reconsider? Ben would understand.”

"It's an honor when a colleague chooses me over another to care for him and his family, especially when it's Ben. That's payment enough."

"But honor won't pay your rent," she chided, shaking her head.

"Bob,” she said a few moments later, “you delayed my last paycheck a week, so I know you're in trouble. Why don't you leave this crummy town before you go bankrupt?"

"I'm not sure if my wallet or my reputation has taken more of a beating, Helen,” he nodded, “but I can't leave until I've vindicated the latter."

"What do you get out of all this?" she asked, scratching her head. "I mean, what's forcing you to do what you're doing? Everyone in town thinks you're nuts."

Bascom leaned back in his chair. It had been years since a colleague had asked him those very same questions. Now, as then, why anyone who knew him would need to, puzzled him.

"During my residency," he explained, bending one arm of a paper clip into a metal comma, "I was president of the house staff. Married residents lived in comfortable apartments, while single residents earned half as much and lived in small, stuffy cells on the top floor of the hospital. Weekend duty meant working an exhausting fifty-six hours straight. It put patients' lives at risk because we couldn't think straight by our last day on call.

"I unionized the house staff and corrected those and other problems, but in doing so I became the target for every poisoned arrow the administration could fire at me." He threw the bent clip into the empty metal wastepaper basket beside his desk. It clinked softly before falling silent.

"A colleague who had worked with me to form the union, asked me the same questions you just did. He refused to believe I had acted altruistically and deridingly nicknamed me 'DQS,' 'Don Quixote in Scrubs.' A friend still calls me that just to tick me off.

"So now you ask what I get out of this?" He raised his arms in feigned despair. "Look around!" he said in a harsh tone. "I get an empty waiting room and bills I'm struggling to pay. And when it's all over, win or lose, I'll be a pariah.

"But *why* I have to do what I'm doing, and *why* I would do it all over again, are the questions you really want to ask. They're the ones we'd both like answers to.

"Don't give up, Helen," he pleaded. "I need your support to get through the final stages of this battle. Even if Davidson beats us, it won't be important as long as we haven't compromised our principles."

"Oh, Bob, I'll try. But don't be upset if I falter now and then," she said before returning to her office.

Chapter 40

Gunmetal clouds threatened a downpour in Arizona's capital on the morning of January 2 as Robert Bascom parked in a thirty minute green zone in front of Phoenix's stately glass and steel courthouse. A fifty-dollar fine awaited those who stayed longer, but Frank had assured him his hearing would last no longer than twenty minutes.

He exited his SUV and strolled around the building's flagstone patio, stopping to snap a small branch from a powder blue spruce, Cristina's favorite tree. He sniffed its fragrant pine aroma, and slipped it into his jacket pocket as Frank Helleman pulled up in a restored Jaguar XKE in British racing green. The tall lawyer, wearing a tan hound-stooth jacket and neatly creased dark brown pants, stepped from the car holding a thin leather briefcase.

Smiling broadly, he waved to Bascom.

"Where's your cowboy outfit?" he asked, as he approached his client.

"Rin Tin Tin is guarding it at home," Bascom replied. “Woof, woof!”

"Ha!" he laughed.

Once inside the courthouse, the men climbed the stairs to an oak-paneled room on the second floor and walked up its center aisle. Bascom sat in the front row on the right as his lawyer entered the bullpen and placed his briefcase on the defendant’s table. Helleman nodded to the Asian

stenographer setting up her machine below the witness-box, and then sat behind the table.

At 8:15, a husky man in a black robe emerged from a hidden door behind the bench. His stern, chiseled face looked as if it would crack if he smiled.

"All please rise," the bailiff announced, "for the Honorable Judge Montfort."

The judge glanced around the courtroom and sat at the bench. "Be seated," he commanded gruffly before asking the only lawyer present if he was ready to begin.

"I am, your Honor," Frank replied, rising and buttoning his jacket.

"Bailiff," he asked, "where is plaintiff's counsel?"

"I don't know, your Honor," the young man replied. "He was aware of this hearing."

"Very well, we'll wait a few minutes," the judge said, impatiently drumming five fingers on the bench.

Ten minutes later a dark young man in a three-piece pinstriped suit and wingtip shoes strode through the gate held open for him by the bailiff. He walked to his table to the right of the bench and placed his alligator skin briefcase on it.

"Mr. North?" Judge Montfort inquired. He stared at the tardy lawyer over the top of his wire-framed glasses.

"Yes, your Honor," he said, scratching a spot over his left eye. "I was here at eight, but in the wrong room. I'm sorry for the delay."

Montfort rubbed his chin and said to his stenographer, "Let the record reflect that, please." He then glanced at Bascom and added, "Let the record also reflect that the defendant is personally present and is accompanied by his counsel, Mr. Frank Helleman."

He turned to Davidson's lawyer and asked, "Your full name, sir?"

"William Rodney North, your Honor," he answered, tugging a shirt cuff over his gold watch.

Montfort skimmed a document and then said, "Whitney Community Hospital versus Robert A. Bascom, M.D. Motion number eleven is Mr. Helleman's request for the production of documents, and motion number fourteen is Mr. North's request for summary judgment as to defendant's third affirmative defense, which states the Hospital has an implied warranty to provide good care at fair prices to the people of Whitney.

"Because the production of documents, motion eleven, is tied in with motion number fourteen, which is Mr. North's contention that the contract contains no such warranty, and that the terms of the contract negate any such warranty, I think I will hear it now.

"Mr. Helleman," he said, pointing a finger in his general direction, "Mr. North describes this as a 'creative affirmative defense.' Your position on this implied warranty is creative, isn't it?"

Helleman stood from his chair. "Not at all, your Honor," he said. "I believe it's a sound and equitable principle of law we should apply in this case. If I could take a few minutes of the court's time, I'll explain why."

The judge glanced at North who was arranging documents on his table. "Continue," he ordered.

"What we have here," Helleman said, pointing to Bascom, "is a doctor who went to work for a hospital under a standard employment contract which said: 'You work for us, and we'll pay your relocation and start-up expenses. If you leave before your contract term is up, you return all the money we gave you.'

"The doctor agrees to this," he explained, "but the hospital is sold six months later and changes are made to the way it conducted its business that he could not accept. He

airs his concerns to the administration and to the community, but the hospital refuses to correct them. In fact, it compounds them to the detriment of his patients.

"The doctor says, 'I can't accept what's happening in your ED, and the State of Arizona agrees with me you're overcharging and providing substandard medical care to its patients.'"

"Was the doctor in the emergency room?" Montfort interrupted.

"Yes, your Honor, he was," Frank said. He paused a moment, then explained, "He was its director and had primary responsibility for, and intimate knowledge of, everything that went on there."

Montfort nodded. "I see," he said. "Continue."

"The hospital then says: 'OK, we'll have a committee examine patients' records during a certain period of time. It'll tell us whether we're fulfilling our responsibilities.'

"At the meeting, as the committee's doctors are discussing their findings, my client leafs through the charts and sees classic examples of what he considers to be the problem. His colleagues say everything is fine, but my client says, 'You're covering up these abuses.'

"So he resigns from the hospital," Helleman explained, again pointing to Bascom, "and its owner sues him for a hundred thousand dollars he claims he gave him. The doctor says, 'you can't make me work under a contract with an implied warranty that says you're going to provide quality medical care at reasonable prices to my patients if you don't actually provide it.'

"Your Honor, in his 'Declaration for Summary Judgment,' Mr. North says no implied warranty should be imposed on the basic terms of the agreement. I'm saying there should be, and that I have the right to produce evidence at trial to show it was clearly and repeatedly breached by the

hospital before the doctor's resignation and departure.

"If I fail," he explained, "then Mr. North will prevail at least as to this specific defense. He'll also be entitled to seek summary judgment to say 'the warranty doesn't exist because it isn't written in the contract, or cannot be reasonably implied.' But this court must decide if his position conforms to the equitable standards this court is willing to impose."

Helleman sat at his table as Judge Montfort turned to his opponent "That's why I wanted to hear this motion, Mr. North. I realize I asked him to speak first even though it was your motion, but I was curious about this. Go ahead, please."

"Your Honor," North began, standing and smoothing his vest, "the question is not 'what did the doctor discover after the hospital hired him.' The question is, 'what did he contemplate when he signed the contract, and was it reasonable under all circumstances'? We hired a doctor to care for patients, not a physician administrator, or an expert on billing practices, to tell us how to run the hospital. If you allow an implied warranty in this professional services contract, you give Dr. Bascom, and doctors in general, carte blanche to say, 'I disagree with your billing practices or competency standards, and I'm walking out.'"

North walked to the front of his table. "According to counsel's argument, his client can imply anything he wants in his contract that will let him walk if he doesn't like the way the hospital conducts its business, leaving it no recourse against him.

"Your Honor," he protested, "in his declaration the doctor says nothing about what he expected at the time he signed the contract. If he wanted veto authority over how the hospital billed its patients, he should have requested it be written into the contract.

"He negotiated a contract that provided him with a high compensation. I don't think he should be allowed to present evidence about things he doesn't like as an excuse to get out of it. I think it's clearly a question of law. There is no 'implied warranty' in a contract such as this."

Montfort turned his gavel in his hand for a minute. "Mr. North," he mused, "suppose a law firm hired you, as a lawyer, under a contract similar to the doctor's, and then you learned the firm overcharged its clients, engaged in questionable and unethical practices, and mishandled cases. After being there several months you think, 'my gosh, I've got myself and my reputation on the line. I've got myself open to malpractice suits, possible disbarment, and perhaps criminal liability. I can't work under these circumstances and I'm going to leave.'

“Is that a breach of the contract?"

"Er, I believe it is, your Honor," he responded feebly.

"Can you raise these matters as defenses to a breach of contract action filed by the law firm?"

"The hospital did not engage in criminal activity."

"Overcharging clients and providing substandard care may not be criminal, but such practices may well be unscrupulous or unethical, might they not?"

North hesitated a few moments before continuing. "Mr. Helleman would like us to believe the hospital…. I don't even think this third defense says−−"

"Someplace I read it," Montfort interrupted.

"This defense simply says the hospital would provide acceptable care and reasonably priced services," the lawyer explained. "According to whom? According to the doctor?"

"He doesn't have or want veto power," Montfort corrected. "He's just saying, 'I don't want to work there anymore.' He's not saying, 'I want to run the hospital.'"

"Well, if you're talking about a small hospital," North

replied, "he might have veto power because he can say, 'I don't like the way you're managing the hospital. Therefore, I'm entitled to walk.' He can force a small hospital to say, 'we have no choice. We can't get a doctor to replace you and we'll have to do whatever you demand.'"

"I see," Montfort said, returning to Helleman. North returned to his chair. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand before realigning his papers already aligned in neat rows on the table, apparently relieved to be out of the line of fire.

"Mr. Helleman," the judge asked, "isn't this like the trial of the Chicago Seven many years ago where everything was dragged in, the legality of the Vietnam War and all the rest of it? Aren't you doing that in this case?"

"No, sir, I'm really not. I have a doctor," he stated firmly, again pointing to Bascom, "who came to this court to explain why, as a concerned physician, he could not allow the hospital to mistreat, misdiagnose, or overcharge his patients. Such actions were, are, and will always be, morally and ethically reprehensible to him. If he is wrong on this point and the rest of his defenses, the court will award judgment for the plaintiff.

"If defendant is right, the court will say the hospital breached the contract and he was right in leaving. That is all we want."

Montfort drummed his fingers on the bench. "Tell me about these patients' records you want to drag around my courtroom."

"It's our allegation the hospital and its physicians consistently performed unnecessary tests on these patients, and then overcharged for them," Helleman explained. "We are certain a record review will confirm it."

Montfort nodded. "Mr. North," he said, "please proceed to your second argument." The lawyer's chair scraped

the floor as he rose to his feet.

"I don't want to put my hospital in jeopardy of being sued or prosecuted because we're making available confidential records without the consent of the patient, your Honor," he said. "We cannot be put in a position where a patient asks, 'What right does the hospital have to make my personal and privileged medical records available to Dr. Bascom, or to anybody else who is not treating me?'

'"This is not an insurance claim,'" North quoted the fictional patient as saying. '"This is not a malpractice case. This is nothing but a third-party wanting to look at my file.'

“As I read the law, either we get a court order requiring the disclosure, or we get an authorization from the patient. Still there is the confidential nature of these records. The law is clear that these patients cannot be identified. Without a disclosure or an authorization I don't think the hospital can be compelled to place itself in jeopardy."

"I agree with your coming to court, Mr. North," Montfort said thoughtfully, "because if I order you to turn over the documents, you are insulated. Nevertheless, there is much we could do in camera, all kinds of protections we could work with. I don't relish the idea, even if I were to grant Mr. Helleman's motion, of going through all these files and striking names and so forth. How many files are we talking about?"

"The doctor says he walked into the audit, picked up four files at random and said 'this is a whitewash,'" North explained. “Does he want to review just those files? I'd be surprised if he can remember what they are," he added with a hint of sarcasm.

Montfort looked troubled. "Maybe−−"

"Your Honor, there are two thousand files," Helleman interrupted, "and they exist as the remnants of this audit. We're willing to decide which are of evidentiary value and

which are not, and I can't imagine there will be two thousand separate lawsuits going on here."

Montfort looked at Bascom. "Is your doctor – he hasn't filed a cross-complaint, has he?"

"Yes, but it's not relevant to this motion."

"It's for forty-eight hundred dollars for rent supposedly not paid to him," North volunteered.

"Something not connected with this?"

"Your Honor," Helleman answered, "we're not coming in here, pie in the sky, inflated damages. This is a straightforward breach of contract claim, but we need to access hospital records to prove our defense. That is all we want."

"I see," the judge nodded. "Mr. North, do you wish to add anything?"

"Your Honor, if we're talking about two thousand files, and if at some point you decide the evidence is admissible, then both sides would have to examine them.

"Their experts are going to say, 'this obviously reflects substandard care or over billing.' My experts will say, 'no, this is not substandard care or over billing.' I'm looking for a practical solution to this, but I don't believe having patients' files bantered around the courtroom, whether they are four or two thousand, is it.

"At some point somebody will need to ask, 'Was this patient over billed? Did this patient receive substandard care?' I might need to contact the patient to find out if he did get substandard care, or was over billed. Was there a later credit or refund that might not be reflected in the file? I can see this growing to where we have two thousand patients as potential witnesses running around the courtroom."

Helleman rose from his chair. "The Comptroller of State of Arizona has already examined Whitney's ED records, your Honor," he explained, "and he found, and it

has been published in Whitney's newspaper, that there was thirty percent over billing, substandard care, and other violations. And he did this without talking to one person. We would like the same opportunity.

"I don't care if this lawsuit is going to be inconvenient for the hospital. The court doesn't make a distinction on the merits of the litigation based on how much time or money the parties are going to have to spend. It has sued my client for one hundred thousand dollars, a sum that will force him into bankruptcy if he loses.

“As a matter of law and equity, the defendant has the right, and I and the court the duty, to allow him to present facts relevant to the meritorious defenses he has raised."

Judge Montfort sighed and rubbed his chin for a moment. "I came in here with the opinion that your motion to get rid of this third affirmative defense might be a good one, Mr. North. I'm not sure now, but I haven't made up my mind, and I'm not about to allow a simple breach of contract claim turn this court into a three-ring circus.

"There being no further comment from counsel, the matter is submitted," he said, banging his gavel on its block. The judge gathered his notes, wrapped and picked up his robe, and left the courtroom through the door behind the bench as quickly as he had entered it.

Helleman stuffed his documents into his briefcase, spoke briefly to his adversary, and then walked over to Bascom.

"Well," he said cheerily, "round one is over."

"Do you think we'll get the records, Frank?"

"Dunno. We need to hope Montfort is interested enough in our allegations to give you your day in court."

Helleman left for another hearing and Bascom returned to Whitney after taking the fifty-dollar parking ticket from under his windshield wiper.

Chapter 41

Several weeks after the hearing, Bascom's cellphone clapped its annoying ring and flashed Frank Helleman's name across its tiny screen.

"We won, Bob," Helleman reported laconically. "Judge Montfort has compelled WCH to give us the records, provided they're already grouped and the patients' identities are not disclosed. He wasn't as convinced as North was about the liberties hospitals could take with their patients' health and wallets.

“That should pick up your spirits."

"He said, 'provided they're already grouped,' correct?" Bascom asked.

"You catch on fast. Yes, WCH says they're not grouped together any longer."

"I figured as much. I'll bet they burned them to bypass the order," Bascom groused.

"I don't doubt they burned the copies, but they wouldn’t have burned the originals," Helleman corrected. "We might be able to get around the obstacle if you're willing to compromise."

"How?"

"Halve your request and share the costs of reproducing the charts."

"OK, but I want *all* the charts from 1 September to 15 October, consecutively numbered. I don't want Davidson to

skip the records he wants to hide."

"I'll relay your message," Frank said.

Six weeks later Bascom's cellphone rang while he worked in his garden. It was early March, and although in the northeast cars were buried up to their hubcaps in dirty snow, weeds were popping through the gravel of his small xeriscaped yard. He dropped his hoe and flipped open his insufferable companion.

"I died and went to heaven," he said. "Leave a message and my guardian angel will get back to you."

"Bob," Helleman asked, "are you off your medications again?"

"I hate cellphones, especially when I see people driving, smoking, eating, putting on make-up and talking into them at the same time. I wonder if they have sex while on the phone also. What's up?"

"You'll love this. North says the judge misunderstood the number of files involved. At the hearing he insists we were concerned with fewer than one hundred, maybe only four."

"Damn him!" Bascom yelled. "Montfort knows there are two thousand files."

"Of course he does," Frank agreed. "Calm down. North wrote to the judge directly about this, violating protocol. And Montfort is a stickler for protocol. Sending me a copy doesn't excuse the breach."

"What'd he say?"

"He wrote, wait a minute," he said, shuffling papers. Over the phone they sounded like wood popping in a fire.

"OK. He wrote, 'the guidance I'm seeking arises from a dispute as to whether the production of these records is required. The hospital has found that the files requested are not grouped together, and the cost for pulling them, which

number nearly two thousand, is prohibitive.

“Dr. Bascom's attorney has suggested we limit the number to one thousand, and to divide the costs between our clients. However, my client feels the production of this many records is not what the court had in mind when it issued its order.

"'Part of the confusion,'" Frank continued reading, "'stems from a misconception on my part as to how many files we were dealing with when the motion came before you. I understood Dr. Bascom wanted to inspect fewer than one hundred files. It appears he meant that fewer than one hundred files reviewed by the audit committee reflected the improper billing and unnecessary procedures he is complaining of in this litigation.'"

"What is he talking about?" Bascom demanded, scraping the ground with his hoe. "He invents the number one hundred and then has the cheek to say I said it? Montfort won't buy that, will he?"

"I doubt it," Helleman answered. "Do you want to hear the rest, or is your pressure high enough for today?"

"My ears aren't ringing yet, so please continue."

Frank laughed. "He ends his epistle with, 'Dr. Bascom claims a review of the two thousand patient charts at issue will confirm his allegations. The hospital disputes this.

"'Rather than moving for a protective order or being faced with an enforcement order, I believe we both would benefit from a modification of your order. Might I suggest Dr. Bascom be allowed access to a random selection of the files, perhaps no more than two hundred, and he be required to reimburse the hospital for the extraordinary costs for gathering them?'"

"No! No! *No*! *Never*!" Bascom shouted. "I know what they mean by 'random', and I can imagine the costs they'll put on the copying. I now want *all* the charts, the full three

months' worth. I will not face another whitewash. *Capisci*?"

"Calm down, Bob. North has hurt himself with the lies in his letter. I'm going to suggest to Montfort he read the court reporter's transcript of the hearing. The number ‘two thousand’ appears there several times. The number ‘one hundred’ doesn’t appear at all. Next, I'll point out that although the hospital alleges the records are no longer bundled, his ruling clearly recognizes their relevancy. Finally, the records are consecutively numbered and dated, and to say they're not bundled is disingenuous. The court's order does not require they be in a neat stack with a bow around it."

"Will they comply, Frank?"

"Not right away. They'll further irritate the court first. It's clear Davidson doesn't want anyone to see those records. He knows that if we prove what we have alleged, the damage to his own reputation and to WCH's would be far greater than any judgment he might be awarded if we lose."

"Thanks. Keep me informed." Bascom was still fuming as he snapped shut his phone.

He phoned Donna a few minutes later and she agreed to dine with him at a sushi bar in Phoenix that evening.

At seven, Bascom knocked on her apartment door dressed in a blue blazer, sport shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. His Stetson covered his long, carefully brushed dirty blond hair.

Donna opened it midway through his second series of knocks. Her black eyes sparkled and her scarlet lips curved faintly upward when she saw him.

"You're beautiful," he said, pulling her to him. He kissed her gently on the neck.

"You always give the nicest compliments, Robby," she laughed, pushing him away. "I mean it. Shall we go?"

She locked her door, closed the grating in front of it, and put her arm through his as they walked to his SUV.

The run-down sushi bar was one of a chain of restaurants that for decades had served entry-level Japanese food in the northern part of the city. A gray, feather-rock waterfall welcomed guests into its small dining room. Two chefs, their heads wrapped with colorful blue and gray bandannas, sliced fish behind a glass fronted counter.

Bascom and Donna went to a booth being cleaned by a young Asian girl. She picked up her tray of dirty dishes and backed away as they slipped onto the benches. Bascom put his Stetson on the seat next to him.

"So how's work?" he asked, taking menus from the end of the table and handing one to Donna.

"Great, Robby," she replied, opening her menu. "I love my job. I'm glad I left Whitney, and I'll never set foot in that dumpy town again."

"I wish I could say the same."

"Any plans to join me and Dr. Jefferies?"

"Maybe when my battle is over. I can’t before."

The waitress reappeared and he ordered ice teas and *maguro*, *ebi*, *unagi*, *uni*, and *tako*.

"Tuna, prawns, eel, sea urchin, and octopus," he explained after she left. "They beat my home-cooked, often inedible meals."

Donna laughed. "You didn’t learn to cook in Italy?"

"Cris taught me how to make tortellini and tortelloni, but mostly I just learned how to eat."

"Clown," she laughed. "Have you seen Evelyn recently?"

"Yes."

"How's she doing?"

"Not well. Ben calls daily for advice, but he knows more about her disease than I do. The guy is brokenhearted.

Sometimes he even cries during the calls. All I can do is listen and offer encouragement."

"I called her yesterday," Donna said, nodding. "Ben said she was sleeping and didn't want to disturb her. She never called back.

“How's the court case coming along?"

"Depends on your point of view. Davidson intends to bankrupt me either before we get to trial or after I lose. I wish I'd never complained about the mess at WCH. My contract would be up already, and I'd be gone from there."

"You couldn't let the abuses continue. I knew that when we first met in the ED. Considering all they've done to you, it must be tough for you to continue standing up for what you believe is right."

The waitress arrived with their iced teas, said their food would be along shortly, and left.

"People fight for what they believe in despite the obstacles in their way," Bascom said as Donna stirred a pouch of synthetic sugar into her tea. "'Tough' doesn't enter their minds."

"Why'd you become a doctor?" she asked.

Bascom shrugged. "Damned if I know. There's never been one in the family, and I didn't even know one until after I graduated med school."

"Predestination?"

"I don't subscribe to theories that dispute man's will to decide for himself," Bascom said, reaching for a green-capped bottle of soy sauce. He rolled it in his hands and read the label. "Low salt," he mumbled before swapping it for the red-capped bottle he placed in front of him.

"What did your parents do?" Donna asked.

"My mother kept our family together in hard times, and my father was a holier-than-thou Puritan who ran a grocery store. He was so rigid, he even refused to sell

chewing gum since he believed it was bad for your teeth. It was one of his many bizarre rules I had to follow or get my lumps. I think they invented child abuse laws with him in mind."

The waitress returned, placed the trays of sushi on the table, bowed, and backed away.

"Did you enjoy medical school?" Donna asked, peeling two bamboo chopsticks from their wrapper. She picked up a dollop of green wasabi with the wooden utensils and stirred it into a small amount of soy sauce. The black liquid turned dark brown in the dish.

"Sure," he said. He watched her soak the sea urchin in the potent mixture, and then bite into it. Tears immediately welled up in her eyes, and she started to blow and cough.

"Wow!" she said catching her breath. "Guess I used too much wasabi."

"It does get your attention, doesn't it?" Bascom laughed. "Add some more soy to it. It'll cool it down.

"But, yes," he said, chewing a piece of octopus, "I enjoyed med school. Living in a ancient city and exploring Italy's medieval castles on my breaks was exhilarating. Oral examinations in Italian, however, were harrowing. At the finals, professors asked us three questions from anywhere in the text they used, and often had written themselves, to teach the course. One wrong answer and you had to wait four months to retake the exam.

"Under that system some students took more than the standard five years to graduate. Actually there was one who had been there twelve years when I arrived, and was still there when I left. The exams terrified him, and he'll probably never graduate.

"To pass an exam I had to know everything about the disease in question, even absurd theories long disproved. It seemed a useless and impossible task, but it forced me to

consider all aspects of a patient's illness. It also taught me how to avoid the traps specialists fall into.

"For example, if you have lower chest pain," he explained as he mixed a tiny amount of wasabi into the soy sauce, "a cardiologist will diagnose heart disease, but a gastroenterologist might diagnose an ulcer. Each would run a battery of niche tests to prove he was right, sometimes over reading their results to confirm his diagnosis. That could result in a tragedy if the correct diagnosis was a pulled muscle. A doctor can psychologically destroy a healthy patient and his family if he misdiagnoses a simple disease as a heart problem or cancer that the patient doesn't have."

He dipped a prawn into the wasabi mixture and tasted it with the tip of his tongue before eating it.

"That was the good side of what they taught at Bologna" he continued after a moment. "The bad side was that a professor could fail you for any absurd reason that entered his mind, such as your hairstyle. If he didn't like it, no matter how well you answered his questions, he could toss you out of the exam room. Since an oral exam doesn't leave a paper trail, if anyone questioned his decision, he could simply say you didn't answer his questions correctly, so he failed you. It was his word against yours, and you had no recourse.

"That's nuts," Donna said as she tried in vain to pick up a piece of tuna with her chopsticks.

"It not only sounds nuts, it *is* nuts," he agreed, "but it happened to a friend of mine who wore a Beatles' style haircut. Because the professor hated their music, he made him retake the dermatology exam three times. The last time a different examiner quizzed him, and he passed with a perfect score. He's now practicing dermatology in a small town in Pennsylvania.

"I know it will sound absurd, but according to a friend

of mine, we didn’t know what we were doing was impossible until someone told us it was.”

"I could never have survived in a system like that," Donna said. After several failed attempts to pick up the tuna with her chopsticks, she dropped them on the table, picked up her fork, and impaled the fish.

"You're smart enough to survive it if you wanted to," Bascom said.

"If you were to start over and had your choice of going to Harvard or to Bologna, which would you pick?"

"Bologna. There I learned what good food is, what true friends are, and what life is about, all wrapped in a cocoon of art, architecture, history, and music. It's why I readily agreed to return to Italy when Cris suggested it. We had everything money could buy here, but nothing of what it couldn't. I was starved intellectually and culturally, and I needed to return to my adopted home.

"But knowing what I know today, instead of going to Bologna, I'd have gone to work in my father's store. Sure, it was a dead-end job working with a bigot, but my idealism in this imperfect profession has become an impossible burden for me."

"Maybe you need to reevaluate your beliefs," she offered. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

"I do, I know I do," he repeated softly. "Maybe I will someday."

Chapter 42

Donna had promised Bascom she would never again work in the Whitney Community Hospital. She was not alone in her decision. No capable nurse would work there once he or she learned that Dr. Albert Evans would blame him or her for his frequent, predictable, and sometimes disastrous, diagnostic and treatment errors.

Those in the medical community knew he spent hours in the gym training for a "Mr. Doctor" weightlifting title and that he used illegal anabolic steroids to sculpt his physique. Many believed the drug had decreased his intelligence, although the most cynical felt it had raised it to that of an idiot.

Donna would never forgive Cohen for firing her for calling Evans incompetent, which even he admitted he was, but in exchange for a profuse apology from Sid Josephs, the hospital's new administrator who was desperate to find competent nursing help, and a wage double that of the inexperienced nurses she would be coddling, she reluctantly agreed to moonlight for one twelve-hour shift in his ED.

She parked her yellow Jeep in the employees' lot on the cool, windy evening of March 25 and entered the emergency department. Alongside the drunken Mexicans and Indians asleep on the benches in the waiting room, a young boy leaned listlessly on his mother's breast. He was pale and breathing rapidly. Donna quickly crossed the room and

knelt in front of the six-year-old child. A bloodstained bandage was wrapped around his neck.

"Hi, I'm Donna. What happened?" she asked the mother.

"Tommy's brother accidentally shot him with his pellet gun," she said, pulling her son more protectively to her breast.

"How long have you been waiting?"

"Over an hour."

"Let's go." *Too long*, she thought. She picked up the boy and quickly carried him into the trauma room. A young nurse arrived to help as she gently lay him on a stretcher.

"What's your name?" Donna asked the blond, pimply-faced girl.

"Kathy," she replied uneasily.

"I'm Donna. Is this your first night on the job?"

"Yes," she said timidly. "I graduated nursing school last week."

"You'll do fine. Just listen carefully to what I tell you, and ask me before you do anything you're unsure of. I want full vitals, an IV, and blood for a red cell and hemoglobin count on this boy.

“Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Who's on tonight?"

"Dr. Evans. He's in his office."

"OK, get started. I’ll be right back," she said, ruing her agreement to work that night. Evans was not supposed to be on duty, but there was nothing she could do about that.

"And put an oxygen mask on him," she added over her shoulder as she set out to find Evans. She found the body building physician at his desk in the doctor's lounge, eating a sandwich and reading the comics page of his newspaper. A blue mask rested on his forehead.

"I need you to see a critically ill patient, Dr. Evans," she said sternly, amazed he could chew and read at the same time.

"Hi, Donna. Longtime no see. I will as soon as I finish eating," he mumbled before taking another bite of his sandwich.

"*Now*!" she demanded in a voice that allowed no further discussion.

"Jeez," he pleaded weakly. "I've been working hard for the last hour."

"That's what you're paid to do. Get in there *now*! I *will not* ask you again!" she threatened.

The musclebound doctor grunted and put down his sandwich. He pulled his mask down onto his face and strutted to the boy's stretcher, stopping three feet in front of it.

Donna went behind it and put her hand on Tommy's brow. The boy grimaced with every short breath he took, and held his tiny hand hard against his chest.

"What are his vitals, Kathy?" she asked as she caressed the child's forehead. His weak smile wavered between a greeting and a grimace of pain.

"Blood pressure a hundred ten over fifty, pulse one hundred fifteen."

Turning to Evans, Donna asked, "Did you hear that, doctor? Low blood pressure and a rapid heartbeat? He's lost more blood than the bandage shows."

"But, but, that's all that came out. Just that little bit," the mother protested.

"I'm sure you're right," Donna said, turning to the woman. She rested her hand on hers. "Don't worry though. Dr. Evans knows what to do."

She knew he did not, but she hoped he had at least understood that the boy's abnormal vital signs meant he was bleeding internally. If he didn't, she would help him under-

stand in a way he would never forget.

She turned back to Evans, who was ogling Tommy's attractive young mother. "Your patient is over here, doctor," she said sternly, impatiently tapping her ring on the stretcher's metal railing.

"Yes, of course," he said. "What is the problem?"

"Tommy's brother shot him in the neck with a pellet gun, and now he's short of breath," his worried mother explained.

"Where does it hurt, Timmy?" Evans asked the boy.

The lad pointed to his chest. "I'm… Tommy," he gasped.

"Does your head hurt?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Belly?"

He shook his head again.

"Well," Evans surmised without touching the boy, "nothing serious, but we need to run some tests. We can't be too careful, you know." He swaggered to the nurses' station ahead of his staff, patting his right bicep.

"Get a skull X-ray and an abdominal series, Kathy," he said. "And add a chest X-ray." Donna eyed him narrowly as he wrote his orders on the chart.

"But he said his head and stomach didn't hurt," Kathy protested.

"Don't contradict me!" he ordered. "Do as I say or you'll never work here again! I also want a blood count, liver studies, a urine test and an EKG. Can't be too careful. And change the dressing on his neck," he said, handing the chart to Kathy. Her hand shook as she reached for it.

"Yes, doctor," she said dutifully. "But his pressure is now one hundred over forty, and his pulse is a hundred twenty-five. They're worse than when he arrived."

"Just turn up the IV. I'll worry about his vitals," he said

on his way back to his office.

"The man's an idiot. Don't leave Tommy for a second," Donna cautioned after Evans was out of sight. "Let me know immediately if there are any further changes in his vital signs."

"I will," she promised.

An hour later the two nurses were waiting by Tommy's stretcher when Dr. Evans returned. "His blood pressure is ninety over fifty, and his pulse is one hundred thirty," Donna said gravely. "I've started a large-bore IV so you can transfuse him."

"I see his tests are back," Evans said through his mask, ignoring the nurse's suggestion. "Hmm. His blood count and hemoglobin are low. That means he's anemic. He probably eats too much junk food and needs iron. Now, let's take a look at these X-rays." He carefully avoided contact with the boy's stretcher as he walked around it to hang the films on an illuminated view box on the wall.

"His skull looks OK, belly OK, and chest…. Hmm, this film is really crummy. Looky here," he said, pointing to the base of the left lung. "It's all white and, um, icky on the bottom. It should be black, like the other side. This film stinks," he said. "Terrible technique." He tossed it into the trashcan and then returned to Tommy.

"I see the nurse has changed your dressing," he said, nodding repeatedly. "It's white and dry. There's no more bleeding. You were lucky."

"Are you sure he's OK, doctor? He's pale and not breathing right. Isn't that abnormal?" his mother asked apprehensively. "And what about the pellet? Shouldn't you take it out?"

"Ma'am, from the small amount of blood he had on his bandage, the pellet just nicked the skin. His color will come

back with the iron pills, and his breathing will return to normal once he calms down. Everyone gets nervous in here."

As he continued to rebuke the mother's mounting concerns and protests, a voice over the loud speaker called Donna to intensive care.

"I'll be right back," she whispered to Kathy. "Don't do anything to this boy without asking me first. Understand?"

The nurse nodded as Evans continued reassuring Tommy's mother, over her infinite doubts about his assurances, that her son would be fine.

When Donna returned to the ED thirty minutes later, Tommy was gone. She asked Kathy if he was in the operating room.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Dr. Evans pulled the IV and sent him home with a prescription for iron."

"Iron?" she recoiled in horror. "The boy is bleeding internally and he sent him home with a prescription for *iron*?

"Where is that bastard?"

Just then paramedics burst into the room, pushing Tommy on their stretcher. The boy was gasping for air like a dying fish out of water.

"Code blue!" Donna yelled. The other nurse on duty rushed over to help as the ward clerk announced the emergency over the intercom. Evans, who stood three feet away from another patient when the alert sounded, ran toward the exit in the rear of the room.

"Damn you, Evans! Get back here!" Donna shouted as he disappeared through the door.

"John," she hollered to the clerk, "get Thompson in here, *stat*!" She helped lift Tommy onto the stretcher and cut off his clothes while Kathy pumped up a blood pressure cuff around his thin arm.

"Zero!" the young nurse yelled in wide-eyed panic. "I

can't get a blood pressure!"

"Calm down and listen to me," Donna ordered as the EMT took a laryngoscope from the crash cart and began intubating the boy. "Start an IV with the largest angiocath you can, and hang a liter of saline. You did it before and you can do it again."

"But I can't find a vein," Kathy protested, running her hands over the boy's arm. "They're all flat."

"I can't find any in this arm either," the other nurse said.

The EMT agreed. "He needs a cut-down. Only a doctor can do that."

"Keep looking," Donna ordered. Since Tommy would die without a blood transfusion, she took a scalpel and a clamp from the crash cart and quickly sliced through the skin above his ankle. She dug the clamp deep into the tissue until she found a vein, and then slipped its curved jaws under it. Slitting the vein with the scalpel, she threaded a large plastic catheter into the opening.

All they can do is pull my license for exceeding my privileges, she thought as she connected the catheter to a bag of clear solution.

She quickly stitched the skin around the catheter, and ordered a technician to bring all the O-negative blood he had. Only a doctor could order blood, but a Mexican had died the last time she had waited for one to do so. It had taken her months to get over the events in the ED the night she first met Bascom, but at least Perkins was a doctor, sometimes. Evans never was.

"What else would Robby do?" she asked herself as she put a gauze pad over the stitches. "ABC, ABC." *Airway. Breathing. Circulation. OK. We've done it all. Now what?*

"Oh, why aren't you here, Robby? I need you! Christ, don't let this boy die!" she pleaded, as a nurse pasted moni-

tor leads on Tommy's chest. Then she cursed, "Damn it Thompson, where are you?"

Moments later the monitor piteously screeched its dreaded news. Tommy's heart had stopped beating.

"Noooo!" Donna yelled, smashing her fist on the boy's chest. "Beat!" she ordered. She scrambled onto the stretcher, hiked up her skirt, straddled the boy’s abdomen, and pumped rhythmically on his chest.

She continued relentlessly, perspiration beading on her face and running down her back, until she felt Joe Thompson's hand on her shoulder.

Tommy was dead and he was asking her to stop the resuscitation.

Donna leaned her head on his shoulder and wept. As she sobbed over her failure to save the boy, Thompson put a beefy hand on her back, patted her gently, then slid it down onto the inside of her naked thigh.

Chapter 43

Bascom had not seen a single patient for two days when Helen entered his office.

"Did you forget to pay the electric bill, Bob? They sent a second notice," she asked, the corners of her mouth turned down. She held the dunning letter in her right hand, in her left, a rolled up newspaper.

"I guess I forgot," he shrugged. "After they shut off all our utilities and we're forced to work by candlelight, I'll dress in buckskins to show our patients what frontier medicine was like."

"Very funny," Helen grunted. "I'd rather not show you this," she said, handing him the *Times*, "but you'd find out anyway. Don't shout your usual Italian expletives while you read it. They make my African Violets cover their purple flowers with their leaves, and weep," she said wryly before returning to her office.

"Get back on your mood elevators, Helen," he yelled after her. "I'm still on them," she shouted from the hallway.

He skimmed the front-page article about Tommy's ordeal, then tossed the newspaper on his desk.

"It had to happen," he said as he telephoned WCH.

"It's been the number one topic around here for the last two days," the X-ray technician related. "Dr. Muscles threw the boy's chest X-ray into the garbage because he said it was unreadable. Dr. Compton had me pull it out of the can

the next morning, and he said it showed a pellet lodged in the kid's neck. There was also massive bleeding into his chest from the artery it nicked. Evans was too dumb to know the white area he thought was bad technique, was actually blood.

"Our administrator said the boy had been admitted at five and died at nine p.m. He never mentioned that the kid sat an hour in the waiting room, completely unattended, and that Evans had discharged him at seven thirty with a script for iron pills. He was almost dead when paramedics brought him back an hour later. According to Donna, Evans split when she called the code."

"Donna was there?" Bascom asked. W*hy hasn't she called me about this?*

"Yeah. She was the best nurse we ever had here. Josephs pleaded with her to work because he's desperate for help. No one wants to work with Evans. From what I hear, after the incident she called him an incompetent, egotistical bastard with less knowledge than a first year medical student. She said if Davidson and the others had listened to your warnings, the boy would still be alive.

"Anyway, someone called Davidson after the boy died. He pulled Evans and made Thompson work the rest of the night."

"Joe must have loved that," Bascom said.

"He bitched the whole time, but he *especially* bitched the next morning. Someone saw him fondle Donna while she sat on the boy after her unsuccessful CPR attempt, and put nails or spikes or something behind the rear wheels of his Mercedes. When he backed out of his spot in the morning, *bam*! *bam*! Two flat tires. It took him hours to get them repaired and it made him miss his surgery in Phoenix. I thought the creepy bastard was going to have a heart attack. Too bad he didn't.

"Did you read the mother's statement?"

"Where she said 'incompetence and bad care killed her child'?"

"Yeah. Her husband's a big wheel in town. I'll wager a month's salary this place will have to cough up millions to settle this one."

"Maybe," Bascom agreed, "but the family has a dead child, and a twelve-year-old who'll be stigmatized for life as his brother's killer. An incompetent doctor destroyed that family. Money won't put them back together again, no matter how much WCH pays them."

"It's a tragedy," the technician agreed.

"Yes, and it could have been avoided. Well, thanks," he said. As he hung up the phone, Helen brought him a list of people who had called to ask his opinion about the accident.

"I'm not the coroner," he answered bitterly, saddened it had taken a tragedy to awaken the community to the dangers of their local ED.

He telephoned the Health and Consumer Affairs Board's most gallant representative.

"Hello, Dr. Adelsohn?"

"Yeah?"

"This is Dr. Bascom from Whitney. Do you remember me?"

"Unfortunately. Whaddaya want?"

"Have you heard about the death of the boy they treated, or rather mistreated, in the Whitney ED?"

"I read about it."

"Since you're concerned with the quality of the care in this state, I wanted to know if you intend to look into this case. Especially since it involves the doctor I complained to you and your Board about. You remember him, the one the state also accused of inventing symptoms and performing

unnecessary tests."

"That's not my job, Bascom," Adelsohn answered. "But *you'll* hear from us. A doctor shouldn't discuss these matters with the press."

"I haven't spoken to the media yet, but I'm sure they'll contact me, and then I will," he roared before slamming down his receiver. It startled Helen who had returned and was leaning against his desk, listening to the conversation.

"As long as his supply of bananas remains constant, Arizonans can feel safe knowing he's on the job," he said, bringing the article to his copy machine. He placed it on its glass, pushed a button, and waited until the machine spit out a duplicate.

"Send this to Helleman," he said, handing his secretary the copy. “File the rest, you know where.”

Two days later Bascom read the article in the *Times* entitled, "Emergency Room Change Eyed." It reported that Davidson had summarily fired Evans as well as the doctor who had falsely testified against Bascom at the HCAB meeting.

It's too little too late, Davidson. I'll bet you're worried that a 'not officially identified,' local physician will testify for the distraught parents of a child who would still be alive had he received the proper care in your ED.

If you’re not, you should be, because he will.

He stapled the article to the one reporting Tommy's death and added it to a sixth, already bulging "Ripley’s File of Medical Oddities" folder in his desk’s bottom drawer.

Chapter 44

A week after Tommy's death, Bascom sat in his office mulling over Evelyn's worsening condition. He had become emotionally involved in her care, and although his professional judgment remained unclouded, their friendship made his inability to cure her personal and painful.

He wondered how difficult her last days would be for all of them when his phone rang.

"We've won, Bob, *we've won*!" Helleman exclaimed jubilantly in his ear.

"We've won what?"

"North says Davidson will drop his lawsuit if you'll drop yours," the lawyer yelled in a sentence that sounded like one long, unintelligible word: NorthsysDavidsowildrophislwsutifyou'ldropyurs. Bascom rested his head on the back of his chair and closed his eyes. He wasn't sure he had correctly understood what his lawyer had so excitedly told him, or what it realistically meant, since it was completely unexpected.

"He can drop his lawsuit if he wishes," he said after a while, "but I won't drop mine unless he pays my back rent with interest, all attorney fees and costs, and prints an apology in our local rag."

"Wha… what…. Are you serious?" Frank stuttered. "You have no legal right to any of that."

"Maybe not, but it's what I want. Davidson knows he'll

lose his case if we go to court. He's trying to bribe me to prevent that from happening. At the same time he's hoping I won't testify for the family of the kid who died in his ED.

“He can't buy me, and I will testify. Tell North to go fu…, to take a hike."

"But it'll cost you a hundred thousand dollars plus if we lose." Frank protested. "Against our five thousand dollar claim, what you're asking doesn't make sense."

"I know it doesn’t, but this isn't about money, Frank. It never was."

"You know he could dismiss his lawsuit, Bob."

"Then why doesn't he?"

"I don't know," Helleman said after a moment. "That's a really good question. Maybe he thinks it'll look better in the press if he can say you agreed together to drop your lawsuits. If he drops his alone, it'll look like you beat him. That’s bad for his ego.

"Whatever his reason, will you at least think over his offer?" he pleaded.

Bascom could hear the disappointment in his voice. "I already have," he said. “My answer is still no.”

"OK, but you'd better be ready for my bill."

"I will be."

"You know, Bob," he said in a conciliatory tone, "most of my clients would accept an offer like this. It takes brass balls to battle a wealthy plaintiff like Davidson. I can't guarantee I'll win this case, but I’ll do my best. If I do win it, I promise it'll be on your terms."

"I can't ask for more," Bascom said. "Now back to our problem. I want those records. Davidson knows that when we bring up the pellet gun episode at trial, and when I tell the jury I had warned him that Evans was incompetent, the malpractice attorneys will pounce on him like hungry hyenas. That might even open this case to punitive damages his

insurance won't cover."

"My firm's way ahead of you there, Bob. We have top malpractice attorneys here, and Tommy's parents retained them today. They will want your testimony as well as that of a nurse named Donna Franklin."

"How poetic."

"I knew you'd like that. But North says if you don't accept the offer, we're going back to court."

"Fine. When?"

"The end of June."

"That's three months away!"

"Sorry, jammed trial schedule."

"If I made you wait that long for an appointment, you'd be ticked off, wouldn't you?"

"Sure, but that's life in my world."

Bascom sighed. "Okay. I just hope North is the most expensive lawyer in the land, and that his billing schemes are as innovative as his client's."

That night Bascom drove to Phoenix to hear Donna's version of the pellet shooting incident.

When he arrived at her front door, John Coltrane's "Blue Moon" was playing on her stereo. He rang her bell, the music stopped, and a minute later she opened the door.

"Hi, Robby. It's a beautiful night, why don't we enjoy it?" she asked, quickly closing the door behind her. She pulled her sweater tightly around her shoulders and held its sleeves with crossed arms.

"Well, er, sure," he said, surprised she did not invite him into her house. They walked the path to the sidewalk and then towards the lights of a 7-Eleven gas station a few blocks away.

"You said you won your case against Davidson?" she asked. Two boys on skateboards roared past them, forcing

them into the street.

"Not yet I haven't. I just said he wants to drop the case," he explained as they returned to the sidewalk. "He's hoping I'll appreciate his magnanimity and won't testify against Evans for his mistreatment of the boy who died from the pellet wound.

"By the way," he turned to look at her, "why didn't you call me about that as soon it happened?"

"I thought about it," she shrugged. She turned her face away, avoiding his gaze. "But I decided not to add to your problems with Davidson. It was a bad scene though. I get nightmares about trying to save that kid's life."

He turned back to the neon sign. "You're a fine nurse," he said, "and I'm sure you did more than any other would have done in the same circumstances. You certainly did much more than Evans did. You couldn't prevent the boy's death, so don't crucify yourself over it."

"I don't have to. Others will do it for me," she sighed. "The nursing board is looking into the case since Evans filed a complaint against me. He alleges he never heard the code, and that the boy died because I performed an illegal cut-down on his ankle. It supposedly caused a pulmonary embolus that killed him."

Bascom grunted. "That son-of-a-bitch is incompetent *and* delusional," he said, shaking his head at the absurdity. "The autopsy will prove a severed artery in the boy's neck resulted in an internal hemorrhage. His parents filed a malpractice suit against Evans and the hospital, and I'll testify for the family.

"Norm threw Evans out of his residency program because he was incompetent. I'm sure he'd testify for you, and against Evans, if he's called as a character witness."

Donna rubbed a tear from her eye. "Thanks," she said, "but it'll still only cause you more grief if you get in-

volved." They reached the end of the block and turned around.

"No it won't," Bascom protested, shaking his head. "Davidson pulled Evans off duty that night, and he fired him a few days later. He can't say that was a reward for the excellent care he gave Tommy. Davidson knew his revenue-generating troglodyte was incompetent, because I told him he was.

“Anyway, I won't let you face this alone."

"Thank you." Donna put her hand briefly on Bascom's arm before crossing it in front of her again.

"Something funny happened after that boy died," she laughed. "While I cried my heart out on Thompson's shoulder, he was trying to feel me up."

"I heard about that. Slimy bastard! What did he actually do?" Bascom asked.

"He ran his hand up my thigh while I was sitting over Tommy’s dead body on the table. When I realized what he was doing, I smacked the daylights out of him. A technician who hates that fat bastard saw what was going on, and out of revenge, put some nails or something behind his tires. They wrecked two of them when he tried to back out of the lot the next morning.”

"It served him right. The man is a pig," Bascom said as they turned onto the path leading to her house.

When they reached the front door, he heard strains of Willy Nelson's, "Always on My Mind" coming from inside the house.

"Didn't you turn off your stereo before you left the house?" Bascom asked.

"Er, I thought I did, but sometimes the control sticks, and the records continue to drop," Donna explained unconvincingly, turning from him. She took a key from her sweater pocket and inserted it in the lock.

"But Willy Nelson? I thought you hated Country and Western music."

"People's tastes change," she offered. "I'd invite you in, Robby, but I have a headache tonight. Maybe some other time, OK?"

"Sure, D, whatever you say." Bascom returned to his SUV, mulling over her mysterious response.

Chapter 45

In the middle of June, Ben Wiggins telephoned Bascom with news he had been dreading for months. "Ev's having trouble swallowing, Bob," he lamented. His sad words knocked against a door they could never open.

"I'll be over as soon as I finish with a patient."

"Thanks," Ben said.

Twenty minutes later, Bascom pulled up in front of the Wiggins's home in its private cul-de-sac.

He walked the winding flagstone path around an eight-foot tall blue yucca, between velvet mesquite trees and strawberry hedgehogs, and up to the porticoed entrance. The twin hand-wrought iron and glass doors were open and Ben was standing in the entryway. He was not waving his handkerchief as he had on the day they first met years earlier, nor was he wearing his toupee. Grief deeply lined his once cheerful expression, and the liveliest thing about the once vibrant man was the colorful Hawaiian shirt hanging loosely from his emaciated frame.

"Hi, Ben," Bascom sang out with an outstretched hand. "How are you today?"

"OK," he replied dully, shaking his hand. "Thanks for coming. Evelyn will be glad to see you."

The old physician stepped aside, allowing Bascom to enter the long, wide hallway.

"Ev's down here," Ben said, leading the way past two

ships in large display cases. A model with a white and black hull caught Bascom's eye, and he stopped to examine it. "Built by Ben Wiggins for his Beautiful Consort, 1980," was inscribed on a brass plaque under the ship's bow.

"Did you build this, Ben?" he asked. "It's beautiful."

"Yes. She's the *Amerigo Vespucci*. I built her and the *Sovereign of the Seas* in that case," he explained, pointing to an even larger model a few feet away. "I quit modeling years ago when my hands shook so much I couldn't string the rigging."

Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto no. 2* was playing on the stereo when they entered Evelyn's room. Leather-bound books, rolled manuscripts, exotic ceramic sculptures and photographs in antique frames filled floor to ceiling cherry wood bookcases. A desk sat in a corner with a computer, an open medical textbook, and a Tiffany lamp cramped together on its narrow leather top. A vintage captain's chair in front of the desk was facing Evelyn's bed.

Evelyn lay with her head on two pillows on a new hospital bed in the middle of the room. Its shiny chrome side rails were up, and she held onto them while gazing out the bay window. Water from an attached Jacuzzi bubbled over red sandstone into the pool.

The middle-aged female nurse who had been attending her, pulled a sheet over her as Bascom approached the bed, but not before he saw the yellowed, wrinkled skin covering her thin abdomen. After Ben's introduction, the nurse stepped back and folded her hands in front of her waist.

"This is the most luxurious patient room I've ever seen, Ben," Bascom said, running his hands over the dials of a new respirator. "The surroundings, the view, the music, the equipment, and especially the care," he said nodding to the nurse, "are gracious." The woman smiled her appreciation.

"Pulmonary and physical therapists come in three

times a day," Ben explained. "Thanks to Mrs. Hoff," he said, "and the other nurses who work around the clock, I get to sleep in my own bed at night. For a while anyway. I'm usually back here with Ev after thirty minutes of tossing and turning. I can't bear to be away from her even for that long.

"A full-time nutritionist is preparing lunch, but Ev won't eat much of it. I don't know how to get food into her."

"No one could do more for her than you have," Bascom said, gently squeezing Ben's thin shoulder. "Don't you ever doubt it."

"Thanks," Ben said with a smile of relief. "I just want you to make sure I don't make any mistakes."

"You won't, but I'll keep a careful watch," Bascom assured him before turning to his ashen patient.

"Hi, Ev," he said, picking up her skeleton hand. She silently moved her lips as she continued gazing out the window. He palpated her stomach under the sheet, and then performed a brief neurological exam. His ministrations had passed from the sublime to the ridiculous. Evelyn was dying. She had no more than a few months to live, if that long, and his superficial examination would do nothing to prolong her life. He was convinced that she and Ben knew it also, and that they would never believe him if he told them otherwise.

He put his hand on Evelyn's. "I'm still waiting for that meal you promised," he said as he gently brushed a lock of hair from her pinched face. She stared vacantly at him before returning to the bubbling waterfall.

"Do you have time for a chat, Ben?" he asked his friend.

"Sure," he replied. Bascom bid good-bye to Evelyn and Mrs. Hoff before they reentered the hallway and

walked to the door.

"Is Ev still against the feeding tube?"

"Yes."

"Then we need to change her medications and begin intravenous feeding since she hasn't objected to that. If we can get her out of her depression and get some nourishment into her, her life will be more meaningful for both of you."

"That would be great!" Ben said brightening at the thought. "What would you suggest?"

"I'll need to check for something that won't hurt her. I'll have the pharmacy deliver it today."

"Thanks, Bob. I appreciate it. Oh, by the way," Ben added, opening the front door, "you've never sent us a bill."

"It'll arrive. Keep checking your mail," he said with a smile.

"I'm sure it will," he said knowingly. "Meanwhile, I'd like to stress how grateful we are for all the help you've given us. You can't know how much it has meant."

They hugged and then Bascom walked to his SUV.

Ben closed the door and called Peter Henry. His long-time friend and lawyer had been hounding him for months to update his will, and he had finally decided how to divide his possessions.

Chapter 46

On June 29, Frank Helleman, wearing a blue pinstriped suit and red collegiate tie, stood behind his table in the bullpen of the oak-paneled room of the Superior Court in Phoenix for the second time. Bascom, in a cowboy shirt and jeans, his Stetson resting on his lap, sat directly behind him in the first row. Earlier in the parking lot, he had screamed *traitor!* when he saw Frank wearing Davidson's pinstriped team uniform, and it took several minutes for his lawyer to calm him once he understood the cause of his client's tirade. He apologized for appearing to have joined the enemy, and promised he would never again wear anything striped. Not even pajamas.

Judge Montfort sat at the bench, impatiently drumming five fingers while glaring at Helleman through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Where is Mr. North this time?" he demanded.

"I can't say, your Honor," Frank replied.

"I'm interrupting a murder trial to give you people an opportunity to clarify my order about the production of records. Why must I always wait for Mr. North?"

"Your Honor, this matter was set at his convenience and properly noticed."

"Harrumph," Montfort protested.

Frank doodled on a yellow pad until Davidson's lawyer arrived.

"You're thirty minutes late, Mr. North," Montfort reprimanded the dapper figure.

"I apologize, your Honor," he said simply as he walked to his table.

"Your tardiness has prevented us from hearing your presentation," the judge scolded. "Please go to the clerk's pool to coordinate a new date at the court's and Mr. Helleman's convenience."

The attorneys exited the courtroom with Bascom following. He slipped out a side door as soon as they entered the hallway.

Two weeks later Bascom, twirling his thumbs in his front row seat, Helleman, tapping a gold pen on his table, and Judge Montfort, now impatiently drumming all ten fingers on the bench, again sat in the courtroom waiting for Davidson's attorney. Although tardiness had been his rule in the past, this time North did not appear at all, and the judge underscored his displeasure in his ruling:

> The matter having come regularly on the calendar in department six of the Phoenix County Superior Court, the Honorable Ernest Montfort, Judge presiding, upon the stipulation for rehearing previously entered into by counsel, defendant and cross-defendant appearing himself and through his attorney Frank Helleman and there being no appearance by plaintiff and cross-defendant or counsel, and upon consideration of the entire file, pleadings, and argument, it is hereby ordered, adjudged, and decreed as follows:
>
> That the records previously ordered to be produced by plaintiff and cross-defendant be produced,

That the issue of the responsibility for the cost of the production of these records be specifically reserved by the court, and,

That pursuant to motion duly filed and noticed, sanctions of fifteen hundred dollars are hereby awarded against plaintiff and cross-defendant in favor of defendant and cross-complainant.

Legalese had become Bascom's fourth language after English, Italian, and Medicalese. He could not know if Davidson was aware of the job his society lawyer was doing for him, but he translated the ruling into English and sent it to the Whitney *Times* for publication, identifying both the plaintiff and defendant by name.

On November 23, eleven months after Judge Montfort's original order, a courier delivered the emergency room records in two large, duct-taped boxes to Frank Helleman's office.

Bascom's long sought and hard fought victory came shortly after his fifth anniversary in dusty Whitney. Since Donna was working that night, he celebrated it in front of his river rock fireplace, staring at the poster of his snow covered baita, with a glass of fine Barolo wine for company.

Chapter 47

At 3:30 Christmas morning, Bascom's phone rang. "Pronto!" he mumbled his usual Italian greeting. "Cris? *Pronto*."

"Bob?" the shaky, tearful voice asked after a deep, convulsive cough.

"Ben? Sorry. I was dreaming."

"Evelyn is (cough) dying. Will you…?"

"I'm on my way."

"The door's unlocked."

Evelyn had developed pneumonia and had been in a coma for several days. Her life now was being measured in hours, but yesterday only in minutes until Ben convinced Bascom to intubate her. She was starving, and he could not bear to see her suffocate as well. The old physician knew the love of his life would soon be gone, but he would not give her up quietly.

During the last weeks of her illness, he had hobbled on his weak, arthritic legs to his desktop computer to search online medical journals for new cures for Lou Gehrig's disease, as well as every life-sustaining procedure available that would keep her alive until he found that cure. His attention span was brief, however, and his grief even greater, and after a few fruitless minutes he would abandon his search and would return to Evelyn's bedside to hold her hand and pray.

Bascom had not tried to convince him they had done everything possible for the dying woman, since that would have destroyed his firm belief he could still save her. Instead, he stood by discreetly, ready to help his friends at any moment.

A few days after Evelyn had taken ill, Ben also had developed pneumonia for which he refused all treatment. He had looked like a fallen cactus melting slowly into the desert.

Bascom dressed quickly, raced to his SUV, and minutes later screeched up the Wiggins's driveway. Apart from the bright carriage lights on the sides of the garages, the majestic home was dark. As he ran up to its stately entrance, motion detectors sensed his presence and lit his way.

He entered the home, waved to Hotei and Zocho, who still guarded the entrance to the living room, and looked to the glow at the end of the hallway.

"Ben?" he called. He could hear Evelyn's respirator rhythmically interrupting Beethoven's "Fűr Elise," the same piano concerto that was playing on the radio in his office the night Cristina died. It gave him a chill.

"I'm here, Bob," he replied after a deep, rattling cough.

"Coming," Bascom said loudly. He ran down the hall and entered her room. Ben, in food-stained pajamas, was holding a red catheter in one shaking hand, and with the other was clumsily trying to separate the plastic tubes taped together in the corner of Evelyn's mouth.

"She's full of mucus. I can't suction her," he said forlornly before a racking cough shook his frail frame. He dropped the catheter on the bed and held his chest until the spasm passed.

"Let me," Bascom said. He separated the tubes, inserted the catheter into Evelyn’s endotracheal tube, and

sucked out the obstructing mucus. He then reconnected the tubes and turned to check the respirator's settings. When he turned back, Ben was struggling breathlessly to climb onto the bed.

"Where are your nurses?" he asked as he helped his old friend onto the raised mattress.

"I sent them home," Ben replied as he slowly crawled under the covers and stretched out next to his skeletal wife.

"Death is too personal to share with strangers. Thanks for coming."

"I wouldn't have forgiven you had you not called me," Bascom stated. "Ben, please let me treat your pneumonia."

"There's no (cough) need now," he said as he lifted Evelyn's head onto his shoulder. He coughed until his lips turned blue before catching his breath. He then gently moved a few gray hairs from his dying wife's face and kissed her temple.

"Ronald's in Africa on a photo safari and is flying back for the funerals," he explained weakly, exhausted from his relentless cough. "Since he won't make it tonight, I'd like you to call the number on the kitchen table before you leave. They'll know what to do."

He again pressed his lips against his wife's head and tenderly caressed her face with his trembling hand. "Evelyn and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the friendship and kindness you've always shown us, especially during this time of trials," he said, looking at his wife with tears in his eyes. "She was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me, and even if our time together as husband and wife was short and plagued with suffering, being with her gave me more happiness than all my years without her.

"Ev and I closely followed your struggles, Bob," he said, turning his attention to Bascom. "One day you'll be

proud to know you had the courage to hold to the truth as you saw it. Not many can say that. We wish you success and happiness in the adventures life still has in store for you, although I think you could serve people best (cough) by running a not-for-profit clinic on some Italian mountain-top.

"In the kitchen," Ben explained between gasps, "you'll find a few things Ev and I feel only you would appreciate. I'm also returning your wonderful book. I didn't want it to fall into less worthy hands."

"But, Ben−−" Bascom interrupted.

"Please." His cyanotic, trembling hand whitened as he pressed Evelyn's head to his chest. "This life has nothing left to offer us," he said softly. "We'll soon be on another journey. If we can take our memories, you'll be with us."

Bascom rested his hand on Ben's bony shoulder. "You're not−−" he insisted.

The old physician held up a blue-tinged hand. "Remember, no matter how long you may live, life's too short to learn on your deathbed that you chose the wrong path, fought the wrong battles, or worshiped the wrong gods. After almost eighty-five years on this earth, the only man I ever met whom I think understood that was swaying on the gate of a lunatic asylum. To each passerby he sang out contentedly, 'I'm free and you're not.'"

Ben coughed again, and after a brief pause added, "I learned almost too late I couldn't change the world, but that I could enrich the lives of those few people who wanted my assistance and love, and 'that has made all the difference,' to reinterpret Frost.

“Now push the respirator over to me, Bob."

Bascom moved the machine to the side of the bed and Ben switched it off. When Evelyn made no effort to breathe, he kissed her forehead. "Good-bye, my love," he

said tearfully, gently caressing her face with his shaking, bony hand. "Don't stray far. I'll be right with you."

He turned to Bascom and with a smile, said, "Thanks for all you've done for us, Bishop. I'm grateful to have known you, but now I must go. Evelyn's waiting."

"But, Ben," Bascom said tearfully, "you can't––"

"I must. Do you get it yet, Bittle?" he asked before kissing his wife's forehead again. Bascom thought for a moment, and then a light went on in his head.

"I think I finally get it, Ben! I do! Really, I do!" he exclaimed to his dying friend. "Alpha-Omega, the beginning and the end. Life and death." It was a simple idea, but at last he had realized he needed something between the extremes of his being to give his existence meaning.

Seeing Ben and Evelyn lying peacefully together, locked in eternal love, made him understand there was more to life than fighting Davidson, incompetent physicians, and injustice. Altruistic knights-errant had a moral duty to defend those unable to fend for themselves, but he now realized he could fight those same battles, not with bitterness and self-righteousness as he always had, but with love, both for himself and for those who cared about him.

As his shoulders molted his rusty burden, a smile appeared on his lips.

Ben looked into Bascom's eyes. "Yes, Dr. Bascom, I think you do finally get it. Congratulations," he said, extending a tremulous hand. Bascom took it and held it between his own. "But will you do anything with your new knowledge?"

"Why do you always ask me these tough questions, Ben? 'Do you get it yet?' And now, 'What will I do with my new knowledge?' I don't know… I just don’t know what I'll do with it."

"Good luck anyway, Robert. Now, I'll be on my way.

Vroom." He squeezed his friend's hand and closed his eyes. His breathing slowed and after a minute, ceased entirely.

"Ben, Ben. I'll miss you. The world will miss you," Bascom said as tears streamed down his cheeks. He held the old physician's hand for a long moment before placing it on his wife's shoulder in a lovers' embrace. He then removed the tube from Evelyn's throat and repositioned her head next to Ben's. He knew their journey, wherever it would lead, would be together.

He went to the kitchen and turned on the light. There in the middle of the beautiful hand-carved table painted with colorful exotic birds, was an old scrapbook, a shoebox, and Evelyn's bowling statue. He picked up the statue and rotated it slowly at eye level, studying the offensive award George Cohen had given her for her years of selfless service in his stucco shack.

What in Hades will I do with this brass bomb?

No answer came to mind. He replaced it on the table and picked up the shoebox. He slit the tape on its lid with the small Swiss army knife on his key chain and opened it. In it were the *Religio Medici* he had given to Ben as a wedding gift, a blue envelope, and a wrapped object with a red bow on top. He removed the latter, carefully pealed away its tissue paper, and then roared with laughter until tears ran down his cheeks.

"I can't believe you left me this, Ben," he howled. Still laughing, he replaced it in the shoebox and picked up the envelope. His name and the sentence, "Please contact my attorney, Peter Henry, in Phoenix," were shakily scrawled on the front. He opened it.

Dear Bob, (he read)

We've taken care of Ronald, but could think

of no better investment in the future than you. We're sure you'll find a way to care for the unfortunate that need your help. You're one of the best physicians we've ever known during our decades in medicine.

Good luck and long life.

With great affection,
Ben and Evelyn

"Thank you both," Bascom said humbly. He carefully replaced everything in the shoebox and opened the scrapbook. In brown, friable newspaper articles, letters and photos, he read the history of Dr. Eric Leighton's battles against medical corruption in Whitney from the early 1930s to the mid 1960s. Following his stories were Ben's own struggles.

He skimmed through the collection of documents until one article caught his eye: "Hospital Accused of not Serving Patients." Then another, "Hospital Urges Investigation," and still another, "Let's Investigate Hospital Emergency Room Costs."

Bascom incredulously flipped quickly through the pages of the worn scrapbook of war stories. Ben had saved every article he had ever written, or had ever been written about him, since his arrival in Whitney. A shaky question mark was scrawled across the page after the last article. The rest of the book was blank.

Ben’s scrapbook was a modern Rod of Asclepius, which he apparently had wanted to be passed on from medical warrior to medical warrior. It documented past battles, but unfortunately offered no suggestions for the future.

As Bascom skimmed some of the stories, he first thought that the scrapbook was nothing more than a vade

mecum of battles not to fight, since the three physicians in the loosely bound scrapbook had lost all of theirs. But it began to make sense as Ben's last words echoed through his head: "life's too short to learn on your deathbed you chose the wrong path, fought the wrong battles, worshiped the wrong gods."

I will miss you, Ben.

He closed the scrapbook, picked up the slip of paper from the table, and called the number scrawled across it. The man from the mortuary who answered with a yawn said he would be over soon to "collect the bodies."

"Bodies" to you, ethereal spirits to me.

Bascom hung up and returned to the den. He squeezed his friends' hands in a long, silent good-bye, pulled a sheet over their heads, and returned to the kitchen to pack up his inheritance.

He turned off the lights and left the Wiggins's stately home for the last time.

Chapter 48

That Christmas afternoon Bascom sat alone in his living room listening to carols on the radio, and reading Thomas Coar's 1822, leather-bound edition of *The Aphorisms of Hippocrates*, one of the books he had brought with him from Italy. It had been his favorite holiday since his childhood, even when Santa had been too poor to bring him a gift. He had not celebrated it since Cristina's death. Because of Ben's and Evelyn's deaths, he would not celebrate it this year either.

He called Donna that afternoon to tell her about the double tragedy.

"You mean he willed himself to die?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. Ben's is only the second case I've ever seen. The first was when I was an intern. A nurse called me to help an eighty-year-old unconscious patient lying on the floor in his bathroom. When I put my hand on his chest, he opened his eyes, looked squarely into mine, said, 'I'm dead. Leave me alone,' and closed his eyes again.

"He had come back from the dead to tell me he was dead. So I left him alone, and he continued on his way to wherever."

"Are you kidding me?" Donna asked. “You are. I don’t believe you.”

"Nope, I’m serious. I get goose bumps every time I think about it."

"I've never heard of such a thing, but if you swear it’s true, I'll believe it," she said. "I'll be at the funerals. Meanwhile have a Merry Christmas."

"I'll do my best," he promised before hanging up.

He was sipping orange juice and listening to Stan Getz's "Autumn Leaves" when the doorbell rang thirty minutes later. He ignored it since he did not relish letting anyone see how miserably he was passing the holiday, but when the staccato ring insisted, he reluctantly rose from the couch and opened the door.

"Merry Christmas," the Price trio sang out in imperfect harmony. He laughed and stepped back to let Jonas, wearing a red and white Santa's cap, enter his home.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Bascom," he said as he passed him.

"And a Merry Christmas to you," Bascom said, "but I don't– –"

"Martha insisted we bring you dinner before going to my mother's," Jonas interrupted. "We felt it time we made a call at your house, after all the ones you made to ours.”

"And it's ready to eat," Martha said in her red and white candy cane scarf and black boots. She held a covered plate up to his nose as she entered the room closely behind her husband. "Where's your kitchen?" she asked. He smelled the hearty aroma of roasted turkey as she followed his pointing finger.

Carl, a pointy-nosed elf in curly-toed shoes and carrying a red box with a gold bow on top, limped in behind his mother. "This is for you, Dr. Bascom," he said. His right arm shook slightly as he handed over the gift.

"How nice, Carl," Bascom said, pleased by the unex-

pected present.

"Open it," he said excitedly.

"OK, give me a minute."

He returned to his couch and slowly and teasingly slit the tape on the wrapping, a millimeter at a time.

"Come *on*, Dr. Bascom," Carl pleaded anxiously. “Open it!"

"OK, hang on," he grinned. He peeled away the paper and opened the box. He removed the large-scale model of a short wheelbase, red 250 Berlinetta Ferrari, and held it up for all to see. One decal was slightly off center, and a dab of glue marred a seam, but otherwise it was perfect. Bascom knew the boy's tremor would be permanent, and he had been curious to know how he would react to being different from his peers. Now he sensed Carl had accepted and was overcoming his disability. He thought it might just be the impetus to drive him to greatness.

"It's beautiful, Carl," he said. "Thank you."

"My hand shook as I was putting on the decals, but I'm learning how to control it."

Bascom put the model on the coffee table and hugged the boy tightly.

"You're doing great, Carl. If I had a son, I'd want him to be as brave as you are."

"We need to be on our way," Jonas said. "We're late for dinner, and my mother isn't the most patient person in the world."

"She's a real bitch," Martha mumbled.

"That's the Christmas spirit," Jonas chided.

Bascom hugged each of the Prices, and after they left, again picked up Carl's masterpiece from the table and studied it carefully.

"Hippocrates was a smart guy," he said as he admired the model's detailed interior through the driver's window.

Chapter 49

Four days after Christmas, twin hearses carrying Ben's and Evelyn's polished caskets drove to a remote, wind ravaged knoll in Whitney's Veterans' cemetery. It was overgrown with weeds, and lightning had split a tree, leaving one of its branches resting on a headstone next to the Wiggins's burial plots. It was a lonely and desolate place, but Ben had wanted to be buried next to comrades who had fought beside him in one of America's many wars.

It was cold and drizzling when Bascom, Helen, and Donna joined the hundreds of Whitnians paying homage to a couple that for decades had brought solace to a populace sorely in need. Other than Bascom, there were no physicians in the mass of mourners.

"So you're the woman my boss told me about," Helen said as they followed the crowd to the graves where the coffins had already been deposited. "You're different, though. He told me you were overweight and homely."

"What?" Donna said, glaring at Bascom through narrowed lids.

"Only kidding," she answered, pulling up the hood of her parka.

After the mourners arrived at the gravesides, Father Hartnet spoke. "Friends," he began, "Ben asked me to hold an Indian style ceremony instead of the usual stodgy one. So I would like you to circle around their graves and to join

hands."

After the gathering had formed concentric circles around the graves, he continued, "Ben practiced medicine in this community for more than half a century. Some of you he brought into the world, others he 'snatched from the jaws of death' as he liked to say. 'Thank you' was often payment enough for this special human being who dearly loved us and especially loved Evelyn, his wife and equal for too short a time. I wish them Godspeed on their journey, and know they will unite in everlasting happiness.

"Are there any among us who would like to recall a special memory?"

Hartnet looked over at Ronald and Peter Henry, Ben’s lawyer and longtime friend, who were standing together in front of the graves. Peter, leaning on his silver-handled cane and touching a handkerchief to his red-rimmed eye, shook his head.

"Ronald?" the priest asked.

"I, I can't." he replied before bursting into tears.

A thin, stooped man in a brown overcoat stepped forward. "I have cerebral palsy," he said, taking his hat off and resting it over his heart, "but thanks to Ben, I've been your mayor for years. In my darkest moments, he made me understand that my humanity and spirit were far more important than my physical appearance. He convinced me I could do anything I put my mind to, so I ran for office and he got me the votes I needed to attain it. I'll be forever grateful to him."

An overweight, middle-aged woman leaning on a gaunt man stepped forward. "Ben and Evelyn took turns sitting by our Ricky's bedside for three days and nights after he got meningitis. They left only after he was OK. We were destitute and Ben never asked us for a cent. If there's a list of great doctors and nurses somewhere, they should be

at the top. There'll never be others like them, especially not in this town," she said tearfully. Her husband put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

When it was Bascom's turn, he said simply, "If Ben is watching us now, I'm sure he'd be pleased to hear that those he most loved appreciated his life's work." Donna squeezed his hand, quietly signaling her esteem for the great man.

The eulogies continued until a downpour ended the services an hour later. Father Hartnet held his worn bible over his head, said his final words, and tossed a handful of mud onto the coffins. He then scurried to his car behind Bascom and the other mourners.

"Ben was more than a just doctor to me," Helen said in the SUV on the way to the office. "He was a humble hero of medicine. The physicians he left behind in this town can't hold a candle to him."

"He couldn't have been gentler with his patients," Donna added. "If there were several nurses on duty when he admitted one, he always asked me to take care of him. I'm only a nurse, but I don't think he ever made a mistake."

"'Only a nurse'?" Bascom shook his head. "You're more competent than many of the doctors in this town," he said. "But since a person doesn't die until the last person who remembers him does, Ben will live for decades to come."

Bascom dropped off Donna at her yellow Jeep in front of his office before parking his SUV behind the building.

"Have you decided what to do with Evelyn's statue yet?" Helen asked as they entered the office.

"No. That ugly thing is still sitting on a shelf in my bookcase," he answered, rubbing his forehead. "I should melt it down and be rid of it."

They crossed the waiting room and she entered her office through its Dutch door. Bascom leaned on its ledge

while she doffed her wet parka and hung it on a clothes tree in a corner of the small room.

"By the way," he said, scratching an ear, "I've finished my review of the ED records."

"And?" she asked as she pulled a few charts from a file cabinet.

"Albert Evans, the masked doctor who refuses to touch a patient, is worse than an incompetent shaman. The records don't show Davidson's innovative billing schemes, but that'll be our next step."

"What does Frank think about your chances of beating him?" she asked. Her face held a look of concern as she put six files in a metal rack by her phone. "This used to overflow with charts," she lamented. "Today we have only a handful of patients. I guess I shouldn't complain though. This is a bonanza, since recently we're seeing only one or two a day."

"Business will pick up again, Helen. Just be patient. As for Davidson, Frank is waiting for my review before he'll comment. Norm Jefferies, Donna's boss, said he'd testify for me if he agrees with my findings, so I'm optimistic."

"Testify for you like fat Thompson did at the District meeting?" she asked contemptuously.

"I doubt it. There are still some good doctors out there."

"Far fewer than you think."

"And Davidson called me cynical."

"I'm not cynical, Bob," she retaliated. "I've seen how shabbily they've treated you simply because you wanted the best care for the people in this town. I don't know how you survived the stress and humiliation."

"I almost didn't," he agreed cryptically. "Well, it's time to document the bad news," he said before going into his inner sanctum to audit his books.

It took him only thirty minutes to realize he had seen an average of only nine patients a day that year, down from thirty when he first arrived in town, and was in a severe financial bind. He was rechecking the depressing numbers when Helen knocked on his door.

"What do the books show, as if I don't already know?" she asked. She leaned against the jamb and crossed one foot over the other.

"We're down a bit," he replied vaguely as he shut the ledger.

"That's the understatement of the year. Did you forget I run this place?" she asked irately, rubbing her neck.

"If Davidson would stop importing doctors," he answered, "we and the farm workers would be better off. A doctor's Mercedes and his ex-wives eat up a lot of his income, which comes only from what he charges his patients. When many doctors share a small patient pie, they increase the number of useless office procedures and return visits. They strike fear into their patients by threatening them with a health disaster if they don't undergo immediate and repeated investigation by the most expensive technology.

"The once popular deterrent 'Dr. Bascom has left town' is now, 'Dr. Bascom can't treat your runny nose. Go to Dr. Plank, our newly arrived ENT specialist who can.' ED docs refer patients to doctors who are on staff. If you're not a member of the club, you don't get referrals."

"Don't use the word, 'colleagues,' please," Helen rebuked. "They're not worthy of the title. Anyway, excuses and explanations can't hide the fact we're in deep trouble," she said softly. "You need to do something."

"I already have," he said with a smile. "I bought two lottery tickets yesterday."

"Darn it, Bob! How can I make you understand the trouble you're in?"

"I know how bad it is, Helen. I know."

Chapter 50

On an evening three months later, as a blustery winter storm filled the air with the spores of the Valley Fever fungus, Frank Helleman knocked on Bascom's door.

"Am I late?" he sneezed as the door opened.

"Nope," Bascom answered. "Neither is Norm Jefferies. He's right behind you."

He showed the men into his living room and offered them a tray of homemade hors d'oeuvres. Frank took a cheese laden cracker before sitting in Thompson's chair with its shaky arms. Jefferies sat on the couch. He had gained a few pounds since they last met, but he still retained his distinguished air.

"Well, Bob, what did you find?" Norm asked.

Bascom handed him a pile of patients' charts from the coffee table and sat next to him. "Bad care, unnecessary testing, falsified patient statements, all thanks to your old friend, Albert Evans," Bascom said as Jefferies read the top chart.

"He can't defend these records in court, Norm, no matter whom Davidson pays to testify on his behalf," he assured his colleague. "In the case you're looking at now, Evans admitted the patient to the hospital with a diagnosis of pneumonia, but his X-ray, blood tests and vital signs were all normal. He might have had a cold, but that was all.

"The next describes an injury to a patient's 'anterior

calf,' wherever that is," he added sarcastically. "This ambulatory patient had X-rays of both legs and hips, all of which were normal, as was his urinalysis. Evans's diagnosis? Carpal tunnel syndrome. I guess he didn't know his diagnosis indicated wrist and hand pain."

Jefferies shook his head. "This is impossible. I can't believe he's this bad. Are they all like this?"

"Some are ethically worse. All the patients in those charts who had head CT scans specifically denied head injuries or loss of consciousness at the time of their minor automobile accidents. He added the words 'possible head trauma,' or 'suspected loss of consciousness,' on each chart, and then ordered the scans."

"My god, that's terrible!" Norm exclaimed.

"It is, but worse than the imposition of nonexistent symptoms, is his misdiagnosis of injuries and diseases that actually were present," Bascom said, retaking the first and handing Jefferies a second pile of charts.

"After X-ray, he diagnosed all of these injuries as sprains or, using his specialized medical vocabulary, 'bumps.' The radiologist diagnosed a fracture in every case.

"To summarize, he ordered unnecessary tests both for nonexistent illnesses and for legitimate ones, and then misdiagnosed his patients in both instances. Four out of five patients in his ED are pawns in his expensive game, but since they usually recover on their own, if he doesn't kill them with dangerous medications or procedures, his misdiagnoses are meaningless.

"If a patient needs emergency care at WCH, like the kid who died after his brother shot him in the neck with a pellet gun, not to mention the Mexican who bled to death because his skin was the wrong color, he loses. A different doctor was involved in the last case, but it shows what's been going on in that place."

Norm clicked his tongue in disapproval. “This is far worse than I imagined," he said, placing the records on the table. "No wonder you're upset. Any competent doctor would be."

"Dr. Jefferies," Frank asked, "are you saying Bob's observations correct?"

"Yes, of course they are. Evans was incompetent when I knew him. I was certain he'd get into trouble someday, but I never imagined it would be to this degree."

"Is he specialized in ED medicine?"

"He might be, but I don't know for sure. I threw him out of my program after six months. He was the worst resident I ever had. He would have done well in a weight lifting contest, though. He was the perfect dumbbell."

Frank laughed. "Would you be willing to testify that these records reveal serious deficiencies in regards to the medical expertise of this doctor?"

"Certainly,” Norm nodded energetically. “This guy shouldn't work in an ED where you need to make a life-or-death decision in a split second. Actually he shouldn't have a license to practice medicine, period."

"Would you list your qualifications, please?"

"Excuse me?" Norm replied, visibly startled by the unexpected question.

"In court, witnesses with the most weight have the most influence," Frank explained.

"I should do fine, then," he said, patting his belly. He listed his credentials and then, rising from the sofa, said, "I'm sorry I have to break up the party, but I've got to check on a critically ill patient. I don’t admit them from the ED, but I always follow closely those that I find the most challenging to diagnose and treat."

After Bascom saw his guest to the door, he returned to the couch.

"What do you think, Frank?"

"He's at the top of his specialty, and that's a big plus for us. Add the fact he dropped Evans from his program and it doesn't get much better. How many charts do you have for me?" he asked as he took a piece of blue-veined Gorgonzola cheese from the tray on the table and gobbled it down in one bite.

"About ninety," Bascom replied, handing him a hand-written list of the charts and their errors. Frank wiped his fingers on a napkin and scanned the list.

"After my secretary translates this into English," he grinned, "I'll send out a request for admissions. We'll see what Mr. North has to say about our findings."

"How long will that take?"

"A while. Don't expect answers the first time around."

"I know, the wheels of justice turn slowly, but I'd rather not win this case posthumously."

"Let's just win it," Frank said.

"OK," Bascom answered simply.

They walked to the door and after a handshake, Helleman exited into the still blustery night.

A month passed before Bascom received a copy of the eighty-five questions Frank wanted Dr. Davidson to answer about Evans's work, as well as a letter from North that specified the date they would take depositions in Phoenix. He would have to pay North's time and travel from San Francisco, but he was willing to do so since the suit had been dragging on for two years, and he did not know how much longer he could survive in his almost patient-less office. He dreaded losing his battle with Davidson simply because he could not afford to fight it, but it was becoming more of a reality every day.

A copy of North's succinct answer to Frank's request

arrived in Bascom's mailbox a week later. "In answering these interrogatories," he wrote, "Whitney Community Hospital objects because they are not calculated to lead to the discovery of admissible evidence. Interrogatories one through eighty-five: Objection."

They don't waste words in San Francisco, Bascom thought. He flipped open his cell phone and dialed a number. "Frank," he said when the lawyer came on the line, "I'm calm, my pressure is down, but *tell me what is going on!*"

"Ouch!" he cried.

"Sorry. I forgot to count to one."

"Lawyers love to play games," he admitted. "It prolongs their client's agony and makes them more money than if they were to quickly resolve his litigation. Are you ready for the depositions?"

"Yes."

"OK. I'll call you to confirm."

"I'll be waiting without food or water until I hear from you."

The next time Bascom spoke to Frank was the evening before the scheduled meeting. "Bob," the lawyer said apologetically over the phone, "we have to cancel the depositions."

"Why, Oh Learned One?"

"Davidson has jury duty and Rutledge is never free on Wednesdays."

"Frank," he said angrily after counting to one, "do you expect me to believe these people make the date for a Wednesday, and then realize at the last minute one of them is *never* free on Wednesdays, and the other has only *one* day's notice before having to appear for jury duty? My father called me many names while I was growing up, but

stupid was never one of them. I'm fed up with those bozos. I want a trial and I want it now, so schedule it!"

"It doesn't work that way, Bob."

"Davidson sues me and I'm fighting to get him into court! What the hell kind of a system is this? You schedule it or I will!"

"I'll try."

"Don't try, just do it!"

"Let me check with the court, and I'll give you an answer."

"I'll be waiting," Bascom said abruptly before snapping shut his cellphone. He understood why North did not want to revisit Judge Montfort, however, it made him no less irate. WCH had done more than wear on his nerves and his pocketbook, it had deliberately destroyed his reputation and his practice. He had become impatient to see them both restored.

Frank's letter to North resulted in an agreement to an August 9 trial date and a new set of answers to his interrogatories. "The X-ray," North wrote regarding a patient injured in an automobile accident, "shows a compression fracture of the fifth cervical vertebra. The ED doctor interpreted the X-ray as not showing a fracture."

Bascom thought it was kind of Dr. Davidson to admit his famously incompetent troll had misdiagnosed a broken neck, but all his other answers were evasive and useless. He tossed the letter aside and called Norm Jefferies. He had to know if his only witness had changed sides, and his anxiety built as he waited for his secretary to connect them.

"Norm, this is Bob Bascom in Wacky Whitney. How are you?"

"Fine," he answered. "How's the political climate down there?"

"It's OK as long as you don't hold Aces and Eights," he replied, referring to the cards allegedly held by lawman and gunfighter Wild Bill Hickok when he was murdered.

"Are you still willing to testify for me?"

"Certainly," he replied energetically.

"Great! Do you know another unimpeachable physician I could consult about these charts?"

"I have a friend who's a program director in Flagstaff. He's as angry as we are with the mess in EDs. Tell him I said he'd better be nice to you."

"Thanks," Bascom said, jotting down his number. "I'll keep in touch."

He called the physician and spoke with a cooperative, understanding voice that, after a ten minute conversation, promised, "Sure. I'll be pleased to testify, subject to my review of the files, of course."

The odds of victory still favor the hospital, but I'm making headway, Bascom thought as he hung up his phone.

Chapter 51

Two weeks before his trial was to begin, Bascom was completing an Italian crossword puzzle at his desk in his empty republic when Helen walked into his office.

"A Mr. Flannery is on the phone," she said.

"Who is he?" he asked without looking up.

"WCH's third administrator in two years."

"What's he want?"

"He won't tell me. He says it's personal. But see that button?" she asked, pointing to the blinking light at the base of his telephone. "Push it, pick up the receiver, and you'll get your answer."

The idea of speaking with someone from the hospital had long ago become repulsive, but he did as ordered.

"Dr. Bascom speaking," he said formally.

"Hello, doctor, I'm John Flannery, the new hospital administrator. How are you today?"

"I'm listening," he answered coolly.

"Er, yes. Do you think we could meet?"

"Why?"

"To talk."

"About what?"

"Things."

"I doubt it, but if I decide to, I'll call you back."

"That'll be fine, doctor. Good-bye for now," he said politely. Before he hung up the phone, Bascom heard the

click that had accompanied all the phone calls from Davidson's administrators since his meeting with Henry Rutledge. Even though recording telephone conversations without permission was illegal in the state, Davidson's administration had taped all his calls.

"What did he want?" Helen asked as he replaced the receiver in its cradle.

"A powwow," he replied, tapping a tooth with a fingernail as he thought about the call.

Bascom and Donna dined in a Mexican restaurant on the outskirts Phoenix that night. After finishing their enchiladas, rice and beans, he told her about Flannery's enigmatic request.

"He knows the bad publicity will destroy WCH if I convince a jury I'm right," he explained. "But so far I've convinced only one lawyer, two out-of-town doctors, Helen and you, that I am. Everyone else in town thinks I'm wacko, a troublemaker, have moved, or am incompetent compared to the new arrivals."

"That's untrue, Bob," she said, shaking her head. She folded her napkin and placed it by her dish. "There are people who believe in you, but most of them have their own problems and don't want to get into the middle of your fight. Others are too lazy or just too stupid to understand what you're doing for them, so they ignore it. That’s life. Accept it."

"That's not easy to do, Di. Not one person in this town has written a letter to the editor in my favor, although some people have written some nasty stuff about me," he complained bitterly. "And most of those who have, don't know me and have never spoken to me."

"Again, accept it. Will you meet with Flannery?"

"I don't know. I thought a trial would bring Davidson's

corruption into the open and solve some problems here, and I still do, but I realize now that even if I convince a jury that Evans killed Tommy, nothing will happen to him since he's not on trial.

"They say the truth will set you free," he said sarcastically as he doodled on the tablecloth with the tip of his knife. "Well, that's bullshit. In this case, it'll probably get me sued for slander.

"Anyway Davidson knew his pet rock was a loser, but in his defense he'll say he asked his highly qualified staff physicians to investigate Evans, per my request, and that they had told him that his work was flawless. Then he'll explain, maybe with a tear in his eye, that he had no reason to disbelieve them, which is false, but that as soon as he learned the 'truth' about Evans, he fired him. Unfortunately that truth came after the unnecessary death of an innocent child. Any minimally competent physician could have saved the boy.

"The same goes for his so-called 'billing errors.' He'll claim he knew nothing about them, but that he corrected them as soon as I exposed them in the local press. He won't mention that every time I shut down one of his scams, he invented a new way to screw patients.

"This is a Pyrrhic victory at best," Bascom summarized, rubbing his fingers over his chin. "If I win, I'll owe Frank ten thousand dollars in attorney's fees and Evans goes free. If I lose, I pay the hospital and its lawyer a hundred thousand plus, I pay Frank ten thousand, and Evans *still goes free*. I can't afford to win *or* lose this case.

After a long pause, he said, "Frank thinks I should drop the lawsuit against the hospital's unethical practices, and just sue for my rent. He's right, but I can't. I have to stop Davidson and Evans before they do more damage."

Donna frowned and bit her lower lip. He disliked see-

ing her features distorted by worry, especially if he were the cause. "A penny for your thoughts?" he asked.

"Not enough. Bob, Flannery's call means you've won," she said as she reached across the table and clasped his hand in hers, "but Davidson hasn't lost."

Her incongruous statement puzzled him, but he said nothing as she traced his lifeline in his palm with a polished nail.

"You're an idealist," she explained, "and you expect Davidson to obey your moral and ethical beliefs. He can't. They're so high, only Ben could. You're not a major problem for him. You're an annoyance, like a flat tire on the highway. It'll stop him momentarily, but he'll call AAA to change it, and be on his way again. He'll never get his hands dirty doing menial tasks himself.

"To save face, Davidson has offered to drop his lawsuit if you'd quit hounding him for your rent. You've refused an offer no one else ever would, and he'll never understand why. But he still thinks he's beaten you. No matter how this ends, you must realize he'll never be convinced otherwise."

Donna let go of Bascom's hand and took a sip of her tea.

"You want to help people, but face the facts," she continued after placing her glass on the table. "There are over seven billion people on this planet, and many are or will be victims of disease, malnutrition, wars, and natural disasters.

"Has your battle against WCH helped any of them?"

"No," he replied. "But– –"

"But, but what?" she interrupted, her voice cracking with frustration. "You're the best physician I've ever worked with, even better than Ben. No matter what the crisis, when you walked into that trauma room, everyone knew you could fix it. Unfortunately, your idealistic view of the world clashes with the reality of life. You keep hop-

ing that some goody-two-shoes will descend on a winged horse, pat you on the head, tell you how right and wonderful you are, and then punish all the bad guys. Well, it ain't gonna happen!

"You can't save the world because the profiteers won't let you, but you can help those who need you. So think about ending this. Listen to Frank. The world will take care of Evans and Davidson in due time. Just sue for your rent and get back to being a doctor before you're no good to your patients or to yourself." She sighed and took another sip of her tea.

"The trial's still two weeks away," he said. "I'll think about it, but I don't know if I can do as you ask."

"Damn it Robby," she said angrily, slamming down her glass. Tea sloshed onto the table and she hastily mopped it up with a napkin. "You're like a worker bee who sees a flower on the other side of a window, but doesn't realize he'll never get to it. He just keeps pounding his head against the glass until he dies of brain injuries or someone swats him. *You can't change the world*!"

"I don't want to change the world," Bascom protested meekly. "I just want my patients to get good care."

"I know you, Robbie. You want a hell of a lot more than that!" she said loudly. Other diners looked over to them, making Bascom feel uncomfortable in the limelight.

"Please keep your voice down," he pleaded with a downward patting movement of his hands.

"Sorry about the outburst," she apologized. "Now it'll make it tougher to tell you I'm getting married."

"Married?" he asked, shocked by the bombshell news.

"In two months. I met a doctor in Phoenix. He's not half as good as you are, and hasn't your courage, but he dotes on my every whim, something I don't think you could ever do. I'm no Evelyn. She adored Ben and would follow

him to hell and back. She put up with his lifelong fights against the establishment, but I couldn't. I need peace in my life, at least at home, and you'd almost certainly bring your fights even into the bedroom. Besides there is room on the pedestal for only one of us, and that's you."

"What pedestal? What are you talking about?" he mumbled.

"The one in every town square, where the unwashed rabble honor the hero who did wonders for them before they stood by and watched him being hung, drawn and quartered by the ruling gentry that tired of his interfering in their get rich schemes.

“They’ll shine your brass balls, I mean your bronze helmet, as long as your effigy continues to bring in the tourists. Eventually, they'll be nothing left of you except a corroding mound of brass covered in pigeon droppings and graffiti spray-painted on by illiterate high school dropouts who could care less about who you were, or what you did.

"The world needs people like you to slow down its inexorable degradation, but you don't need us mere mortals. You can live on beans in a shack without running water on a freezing mountaintop, and you can trudge through six-feet of snow in pajamas and slippers, but I can't. Sure, we’d get along for a while, especially because the sex is great, but eventually we'd go our separate ways. It would hurt much more then than now."

Bascom gently tapped the tip his knife on the table. "First Ben, now you chastise me," he said after a deep sigh. "It hurts to admit it, but you're right. I loved Cris more than anything in the world, but if she were here today, she'd applaud you.

"I pretended they weren't there, but now I'm sure the cracks in our marriage were because of my interminable battles against everything. I'll bet the real reason she

wanted so desperately to return to Italy was to save us.

"Lizzano is a small town on the side of a mountain, but it's where I briefly practiced medicine as I believed it should be practiced. I had no battles to fight and I should have stayed there," he said thoughtfully. He dropped his knife and ran his hand through his long hair, bunching it together at the base of his skull. He had often thought of wearing it in a ponytail, common among Whitney's farm workers, but then would have had to get tattoos to match. He had abandoned the idea immediately.

"I find no pleasure in doing what I'm doing, Donna, please believe me," he said after a while. "Public speaking gives me sweaty palms, lawyers give me hives, and threats give me sleepless nights. I don't want statues, honors or even tidy newspaper articles written about me. I fight for what I think is right, and not for any reward. Still– –"

"'Still' what?" she asked impatiently, then shook her head, knowing her words were falling on deaf ears.

"Still, well, emotional and psychological torment, and bankruptcy, seem a high price for me to pay for simply asking my colleagues to give our patients good, honest, inexpensive, care," he said. "No wonder people much smarter than I grumble about what's wrong with the world, and then do nothing. It's a lot safer.

"Well, Donna, it's been great knowing you," Bascom said with a weak smile. "I wish you luck, fortune, and happiness in your marriage. If you ever need my help, just call."

"I will," Donna whispered, stroking her nose. "Now, please take me home before I start to cry."

Bascom paid the bill and they left the restaurant. They drove in awkward silence until he arrived at Donna's home. Before his SUV rolled to a complete stop, she jumped out and ran up to her house.

As he watched her open her front door, he heard Ben scolding him. "I thought you got it, Bob," he said, "but I was wrong." He had understood Donna's lecture, and even Frank’s admonition, but he still believed it was an act of cowardice to retreat from a battle before clear victory or defeat.

He knew what he was doing was right and he was not yet ready to blend grays into his black and white world, even if it meant financial ruin, had cost him a future with Donna, and he would suffer Ben's wrath from the heavens.

After a week of agonizing soul-searching, Bascom called the WCH administrator and agreed to meet him for lunch the same day. It was a decision not easily reached, but it won over his stubborn adherence to his romantic and unrealistic vision of his role in a good profession but a bad business.

John Flannery, a carrot-topped man in his mid-thirties with freckles and crooked teeth, was waiting in front of the shabby Mexican diner west of Whitney when Bascom arrived five minutes late for their appointment.

"Hello, doctor," he said, offering a thin hand with manicured nails.

"Hello, Mr. Flannery. Shall we go in?" Without waiting for an answer, Bascom passed several men in overalls arguing heatedly in Spanish and entered the eatery. He slid into a booth whose torn seating had been partially repaired with duct tape. Flannery sat across from him.

"What's good here?" he asked.

"Nothing, but I usually have a combination platter."

"I’ll have the same," he told the waitress who had arrived to take their orders.

After she left they stiltedly discussed automobiles, rodeos, and desert dust until their food arrived. When it did,

Bascom slowly forked the refried beans around his plate.

"How can we settle our differences, doctor?" Flannery asked cautiously while cutting his enchilada.

"We should get a few things straight first," Bascom replied, resting his fork on his plate. "Your boss is trying to gouge as much money as possible from this community, while ignoring the human suffering he is causing."

Flannery put his utensils on his plate, straddled it with his elbows, and closed one hand over the other.

"Since his lawsuit is simply retaliation for my interference in his schemes, for him to settle this, I want my back rent, with bank, not legal, interest, and all my legal fees and costs paid to me. Then, I want an apology in the *Times*, acceptable to me, explaining how he has dismissed his lawsuit and reached a financial settlement with me. I also want him, in that same article, to acknowledge my professional competence. I will accept nothing less.

"Finally, I want the remaining records from the ad hoc audit copied at your expense. Evans is incompetent and I want his license." Bascom tried to push his warm plate away from him, but it stuck to the plastic tablecloth.

"I can't answer for Dr. Davidson," Flannery said, putting his hands in his lap. "But I will tell him about your proposal and get back to you with an answer."

"Not with me. I will have no further contact with you. Your lawyer can call mine," Bascom responded, remembering the unpleasant results of the meeting with Henry Rutledge, Davidson's last emissary.

"Fine," he agreed. He shook Bascom's hand and picked up the tab before leaving the booth.

Bascom sat in his deserted office an hour later, boots on the desk and a newspaper in hand, when Helen announced over the intercom that Helleman was on the line.

He put down the paper and picked up his phone.

"*We've won*!" Frank exclaimed as soon as he said "pronto." "*We have finally won*! North told me Davidson has authorized him to give you everything you want. Well, almost everything. He can't guarantee Evans will lose his license.

"What happened there today?"

After Bascom summarized the meeting with the administrator, Frank said excitedly, "This is great! You're as stubborn as a mule, and it worked out."

"I'm a real Ripley's character," he agreed self-mockingly. "How long will it take to wrap up this mess?"

"Probably a couple of weeks to copy the records and to draw up the settlement documents. I'll make sure the *Times* publishes the apology even if we have to pay to get it in a part of the paper where readers might see it."

"Will that be before or after the advertisements offering sexual gratification with sheep?"

"Cynical right to the end, eh, Bob?"

"Sorry, Frank, you're right. You did a great job. I'll talk to you later."

He hung up and called Helen into his office. "It's over," he said as she stepped through the doorway.

"I *told* you we'd win!" she said, grinning from ear to ear. She ran around the desk and gave him a hug from behind. "I knew Frank could do the job!"

"At times your help was more important to me than his. But now you need to take a letter," he said.

After the dictation was finished, he handed her a medical journal. "The address is in here. Go home when you're done. No sense both of us hanging around an empty office."

"Right, Boss," she said. She turned to leave but not before he saw tears in her eyes.

As he leaned back in his chair, his eyes fell on Evelyn's retirement statue in his bookcase. "Ben's gifts!" he reminded himself before retrieving the shoebox and the bowling trophy with its middle finger transformed into a Bronx salute.

Evelyn was worth much more than this. He shook his head and put the statue on his desk before removing the blue envelope from the shoebox. Ben's instructions scrawled across its front said, "Please contact my attorney, Peter Henry, in Phoenix."

He dialed the lawyer's number. A secretary answered, and seconds later a friendly voice came on the line.

"Hello, Dr. Bascom. I've been waiting for your call."

"I'm sorry about the delay, Mr. Henry. How can I help you?"

"How can *I* help *you*? Ben and I grew up together, and I was privileged to be his friend and counsel. He was more than a good man and a fine physician, he was also an astute businessman of significant worth."

"So this is about Ben's estate?" Bascom asked.

"The Evelyn and Benjamin Wiggins Trust, to be precise. He established it to provide free medical services to the needy. We will administer it here, but aid may be provided anywhere in the world. There are three trustees. I'll focus on its legal aspects, Mr. Bill Tillman on investments and financial, and you on medical aid and services. In addition, Ben specifically requested you be an employee of the trust. It now generates fifty thousand dollars a month. As we refine its assets, you should have seventy-five thousand dollars a month to divide between services and personal income, as you see fit."

"You mean seventy-five thousand a year," Bascom corrected.

"A month," he repeated.

Bascom was incredulous. Because of his penchant for giving free care to the poor and not running useless tests on his patients, seventy-five thousand dollars was twice what he grossed in a year.

"How much did Ben give to this trust?"

"Over ten million dollars," Henry responded, "although when we settle the estate, additional funds will pour into it. I'd like to meet with you and Bill to go over the specifics."

"Maybe in a week. Would that be OK?"

"That'll be fine, doctor. I'll await your call."

Bascom hung up and called Lance Berkford. After a half a dozen rings, a grumpy voice answered, "Go away."

"What are you doing in bed in the middle of the afternoon, Lance?"

"I had a terrible night in the pit. What's up?"

"I won."

"I said you would," he yawned.

"I feel I sold out by not going to court."

"You did more than you needed to do, but if you think it wasn't enough, wear your hair shirt for a week. Is it still hanging in your closet?"

"Yes," he laughed. "The damn Jesuits taught me how to think, but not how to survive in a vicious world. They also instilled in me a constant sense of guilt. It's terrible when you always feel you've done something wrong, even when you know you haven't. Anyway, I'm tired of watching a few greedy souls destroy other people's lives in their struggle for the 'medical grail,' as Frank calls it," he said. "So I intend to take Ben's suggestions on how to be an idealist and keep my sanity at the same time, even if my colleagues think I'm nuts."

"You must have really liked the guy. You always speak about him," Lance interrupted.

"They'll never be another like him," Bascom agreed.

"That's a real compliment coming from a nit-picking pain-in-the-ass like you."

"Thanks," he laughed. "I'm returning to Lizzano, where men doffed their caps when I passed them on the street, and where women left plucked chickens outside my door in appreciation for care I gave their poor families. It was the way folks there showed their respect to another human being for his worth, and not for what he thought his title or riches deserved."

"What'll you do there, Bob?"

"Open a clinic. The government sends disadvantaged kids there every summer to play tennis in a smog-free environment. I'll make sure they get special medical assistance when needed. I'm really concerned about how the Lizzanesi will receive me though, since I failed them after Cris's death."

"They'll welcome you back," Lance said. "I don't think they've forgotten how good you are. Where will you get the money?"

"I get nine hundred thousand dollars a year from Ben's trust to use as I see fit."

"Nine hundred thousand bucks?"

"Yup."

"Wow! Did you win!"

"I didn't win," Bascom disagreed. "I never win. People like me fight with our wooden swords against rifles, and end up mocked and maimed for our efforts. Ironically, even though we know what awaits us, we still fight our losing battles. We never seem to learn."

"That's why Fred named you 'DQS.'"

"Please don't call me that again, Lance. It makes me feel like a fool."

"If it weren't for fools like you, this planet would be much worse off."

"I doubt it."

"'Thickheaded,' doesn't begin to describe you. Will you take Donna with you?"

"We broke up."

"Damn! Are you some kind of failed lab experiment, Bascom?" Lance sighed.

"It's likely, but I hear there's a home frontal lobotomy kit on the market. One little hole in my skull, and I'll even be happy sitting on Davidson's lap."

"Don't forget to castrate yourself first. I wouldn't want a stray erection to confuse you," Lance suggested cynically.

"I told you the Jesuits screwed with my head," he answered. "But that's over. I'm giving up living my life based on some religious dogma. And while I'm on the mountain, I'm going to expand my old newspaper articles into a book.

“I've even thought of a catchy title."

"What's that?"

"How to Be a Patient and Live to Tell the Tale!"

"The establishment will trash it," Lance laughed.

"Maybe. King Hammurabi decreed in 1700 B.C. that doctors guilty of malpractice would have their fingers cut off. It was better justice than today's oversight by trial lawyers looking for their share of juicy malpractice verdicts, but patients need a more practical guide to survive what's happening in medicine today. Actually, if doctors *and* their lawyers got their fingers chopped…."

Lance laughed again. "How do you come up with this stuff?"

"Bedtime reading."

"Do you think anyone will publish it?"

"No, but it'll give me something to do when I'm not seeing patients, skiing the Corno, or hiking in the forests around the town."

"I'll never understand you, Bascom."

"That makes two of us. What are you up to?"

"I'm accepting a position with the Indian Health Service in New Mexico."

"Will Rachael go along?"

"Nah. We broke up too," he explained. "Beauty is only skin-deep, and in her case, beneath the skin was just more skin. Maybe I'll find a squaw."

"I could use help in the clinic. Since your Spanish is first-rate, you'd learn Italian in six months."

"Maybe someday," Lance promised, "but now I have to run."

Chapter 52

The next morning Bascom dropped off Evelyn's repugnant bowling trophy at his mechanic's garage and then drove to his office where Dr. Chang was awaiting him. After a brief meeting, the doctor handed Bascom an envelope and left.

He then bundled Evans's ED records with the newspaper article reporting Tommy's pellet gun death, and left for Phoenix. There he joined Peter Henry and Bill Tillman, co-trustees of the Wiggins trust, in a productive two hour meeting. Afterward he drove to Marvin Adelsohn's building.

He entered the HCAB member's empty office at the lunch hour with the documents tucked under his arm. A green-eyed secretary typing with one finger, looked up as he approached her desk.

"I'd like to speak to Dr. Adelsohn," he said firmly. "I'm Dr. Bascom."

"One moment, please," she said, picking up the telephone. She spoke briefly and then hung up the receiver.

"I'm sorry. Doctor says you'll have to return when you have an appointment," she said primly.

"Sure thing," he said, walking towards a door marked "Private."

"Wait! You can't go in there!" she protested, quickly rising from her chair.

"It'll take only two minutes," he responded, flinging open the door. Adelsohn was eating a sandwich at his desk, and his head jerked up as his door crashed into the wall.

"See here, Bascom," he spluttered, "you can't come in here like– –"

"Sit down," he ordered the obese figure. "I won't take much of your time." He strode across the room and dropped the records on the desk, knocking over a Styrofoam cup. Its dark contents raced across the desk and spilled onto Adelsohn's lap.

Bascom put his fists on the desk and leaned toward Adelsohn who was brushing the liquid off his pants.

"You said you wanted proof, fat man? Here it is," he snarled, rapping the back of his hand on the files. "There's also an article in here reporting the tragic story of a boy who would be alive today had he received even basic care in our local ED. I called you about him after he died, but you said it wasn't your job to care. Well now it is!"

"Lis– –" came the pathetic interruption to the diatribe.

"*Zitto*! Shut up!" Bascom commanded as his opponent paled. "I want you to remember this boy, Adelsohn," he ordered, wagging a menacing finger in his face. "Had it not been for you, Evans would have been off the ED staff and that boy would still be alive!

"Your proof is in these charts," he jeered. He picked up a few of them and flung them at Adelsohn one at a time, like floppy Frisbees. "I doubt you'll ever read them, or if you did, you'd have the brains to understand them or the guts to act on them. But no matter what you do, I want you to remember the boy! Every time you look at your kids, every time you see your fat, stupid face in the mirror, I want you to remember the boy you killed and the job you failed to do!

"By the way," Bascom added in a more conciliatory

tone, "as an incentive for you to begin a real investigation, my attorney has a copy of these records. Should you do nothing, in one month he will release my final article to the Phoenix newspapers, indicting your lazy, incompetent, fat ass. Then, the community can judge the job you and your group have been doing to protect it from bad docs." He glared at the ashen figure a moment longer before turning away from the desk.

As he did, Adelsohn yelled out behind him: "This is intimidation! I'll sue! I'll have your license for this! I, I'll…" he griped lamely.

Bascom wheeled. His anger was at its peak and he wanted to pull Adelsohn from his chair and pound him into a greasy hamburger.

"If you're smart, you'll cover your ass with a real investigation," he said contemptuously. "But if you prefer to sue me, go right ahead, faccia da culo. I'd love to take you on." He again turned and walked towards Adelsohn's secretary. The young woman was pressing herself flat against the door in an apparent attempt to blend into the paint.

"He wasn't so busy," he said gently to the terrorized woman. She smiled nervously as he brushed past her.

When he arrived back in Whitney, he dropped off his SUV at his mechanic's garage, and walked the few blocks to his office. He saw three patients that afternoon and then returned to the garage. His SUV was in the lot, and after verifying the newly installed shelf was level with the base of its rear window, he entered the office.

"Nice job with the shelf, Fred," he said. "How about the statue?" The mechanic took the trophy from below the counter and shook it. "Perfect!" Bascom said sinisterly. He paid his bill and left with the bronze figure under his arm as Fred shook his head.

Bascom drove home, whistling all the way. He had not felt so good in many years. He felt even better two days later when he read the article in Sunday's *Times*:

To Whom It May Concern:

Whitney Community Hospital and Robert Bascom, M.D., have announced they have reached a settlement in the litigation initiated by the hospital. WCH has dismissed its complaint with prejudice, and will pay Dr. Bascom an undisclosed amount in settlement of all current and future claims he may have, including all attorney's fees and costs.

The hospital would like to thank Dr. Bascom for his most professional assistance to WCH during his term as its Emergency Department director.

John Flannery,
Hospital Administrator

On Monday morning, new patients and well-wishers flooded his office with phone calls. He refused to speak with any of them except Jonas Price.

"Congratulations, Doc," he said. "I knew you'd win, even if most of the town didn't think so."

"It's over, Jonas. That's all that counts."

"Not yet it isn't!" he disagreed. "Some important people and I will be filing a class action suit against Davidson and his hospital as soon as we can find the right lawyer. Will you help?"

"No. I'm returning to Italy, but Frank Helleman is your man."

"Italy?"

"My adopted land. Someday you might send Carl over to spend a summer with me," he added. "I can show him the country and, if he's interested, help him apply to my alma mater, the University of Bologna Medical School."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. Someone has to carry the Rod of Asclepius," he replied, recalling Ben's scrapbook.

"What's that?"

"It's not important, Jonas. Helen will give you my new address. Give my love to Martha and Carl."

"But– –"

"Sorry, I really have to go. Stay well and good luck," he said, before hanging up. He leaned back in his chair and put his boots up on his desk, wondering whether Jonas and his friends would stand up to Davidson. People do rebel as the French aristocracy learned to its dismay during a popular uprising a couple of hundred years earlier. Whether the Whitnians would find the strength and courage to fight medical corruption in their town was no longer his problem.

Helen was bubbling with excitement when she entered his office. "The phone's been ringing off the hook all morning, Bob. I've been hearing comments from 'we knew you were right,' to 'you're a great doctor,' to 'we were rooting for you all along.' We have more patients scheduled for tomorrow than we've had since you opened," she said enthusiastically, her eyes sparking as they did when they first met.

"Old patients are making appointments for physicals for weeks from now, and new ones want you as their doctor."

"Dr. Chang will be pleased to know he has such a busy schedule ahead of him," Bascom said as the doctor entered his office. He smiled at the news, stopping just inside the

door. He's your new commander-in-chief."

"You won't stay?" she pleaded tearfully.

"No. I'm returning to Italy. Helen, you stuck with me through it all, and I'll never forget you for it," he said. He rose from his chair and picked up an envelope from his desk. It held a check for twenty-five thousand dollars.

He walked over and hugged her.

"This, thanks to Dr. Chang and Ben's Trust, is for the increases and bonuses you never received," he explained, handing her the envelope.

"Bob, I don't– –"

"No need to say anything," he said. He then took Ben's shoebox and scrapbook from his desk, shook Dr. Chang's hand, wished him luck, and left without looking back.

He drove home and packed his suitcase, but left the poster of his snow-covered baita on the living room wall. He fetched the bottles of Armando Manni's olive oil and Pedroni's *Cesare* balsamic from the cabinet over the sink where he had stored them after Joe Thompson had unceremoniously emptied them onto his salad, and dropped them into the garbage.

Time for new memories.

He picked up his suitcase, returned to his SUV, and tossed it into the backseat of the vehicle. He then took Evelyn's modified bowling trophy from the passenger seat, unscrewed the wing nut from its base and then screwed it onto the shelf so it could be seen from the rear window.

Now for the piece de resistance. He climbed into the driver's seat and took Ben's toupee from the shoebox. He laughed as he put it on his head and checked it in his rearview mirror.

Satisfied he had tilted it just as Ben would have worn it, he started the SUV and drove away. In his rearview mirror he could see the female figure in her bowling poise, her

right arm extended with the thermometer growing out of the middle finger of her hand. Every time the SUV bounced or braked, her arm would swing up and down in an unmistakably obscene gesture. It resembled, in a profane way, the bobblehead dolls in the rear windows of the classic Chevrolets and Fords that paraded Whitney's potholed main street on Saturday nights.

He drove past doctors' offices and down Navajo Trail, Whitney's ritzy neighborhood, tapping his brakes when he passed people so they too could enjoy the statue's one-armed salute. He was sure Wiggins was somewhere up there saying, "Atta boy, Bathtub."

As he drove past the hospital on Apache Lane, Simon Davidson and Joe Thompson were talking together on the sidewalk. He pulled up in front of them and rolled down his window.

"Hi, Joe," he said. "I thought I'd say good-bye to you and your loser friend."

"Loser?" Davidson roared like an indignant male lion. "You're the loser, not me."

Bascom, looking straight into his eyes, said, "Davidson, when I was growing up there was a kid in the neighborhood who thought he could do whatever he wanted because he had money. He was wrong. The other kids hated him and regularly kicked his ass until his mother paid them off.

"Rather than kick your puny ass," he snapped as Thompson backed away from the curb, "I'm leaving you and your hospital to a pack of wolves and their lawyers.

"And as for you, Joe, say hello to your son for me," he said to the obese surgeon.

"I, I don't have a son," he stuttered lamely.

"You sure do. You do remember Helen, don't you? You've got her picture in your office. Her son, *your* son,

has inherited your congenitally dimpled earlobe, but not your pathetic personality. It's never too late to redeem yourself," he said before quickly adding, "I take that back. In your case it might be.

"Ciao," he concluded as he pulled his SUV a few feet forward. When he was sure they could see Evelyn's statue, he tapped the horn and then the brakes. He watched her arm swing up and down in his rearview mirror, and then sang out, "I'm free and you're not," before driving away.

He was humming "*Vincerò*," "I shall win," from Giacomo Puccini's unfinished operatic masterpiece *Turandot*, when he arrived at Sky Harbor airport an hour later. He parked in the lot, where a friend of Donna's would pick up the SUV that evening, and then rode the passenger bus to the terminal. After checking his bag, he sat in the waiting room until he boarded his plane.

Almost six years after first setting foot in Arizona's beautiful Sonoran desert, Bascom began the long return trip to his adopted homeland, eager and curious, but most of all, confident, about the real contribution he could now make to the profession he loved.

**** FINE ****

The Author

Raymond C. Andrews is an American born physician who graduated from the University of Bologna Medical School in Italy in 1970. After training in general surgery, neurosurgery, and aerospace medicine, he accepted the position as an emergency room director in a New Jersey hospital.

In the late 1970s he entered private practice in California and later wrote a popular series of articles on health care for the Bakersfield *Californian*. Other articles and comments of his have appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Bergen Record*, and *Private Practice*. While in practice he developed "Drop-in-Laboratory Services" to make access to medical care easier and less costly for the migrant workers that were a large portion of his patients.

Lured back to Italy by medieval castles and the opera at *La Scala* in 1984, Dr. Andrews worked ten years for the state health system. He also was the first physician to participate in the then newly established Italian 911 emergency hot line system.

After twenty-five years of medical practice on two continents, and with the regrettable certainty that patient care has taken a backseat to bureaucracy and to the questionable tactics of some of his colleagues both here and abroad, in 1995 he accepted a position with the United

States Public Health Service and was a director of a Navajo clinic on their reservation in northeastern Arizona. He was also director of the clinic's Emergency Medical Services, and a director of the National Native American Emergency Medical Services Association.

Dr. Andrews is retired and passes his time writing, building model ships, and driving his modified Jeep and camper in the Arizona desert.

He has published Dr. Bascom's book, *How to Be a Patient and Live to Tell the Tale!* as well as *The Life and Times of Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.*, the prequel to *Medical Grail.*